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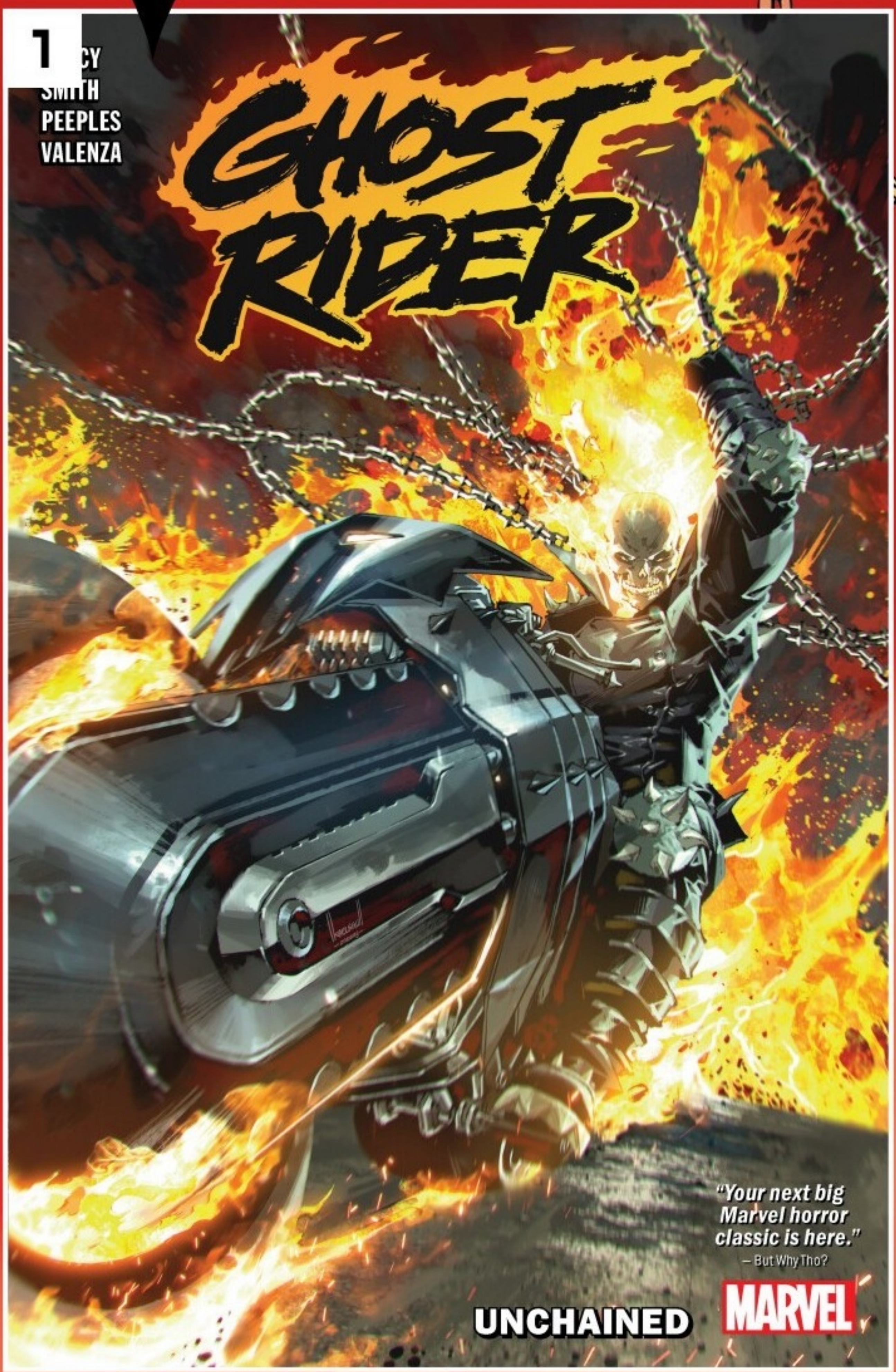
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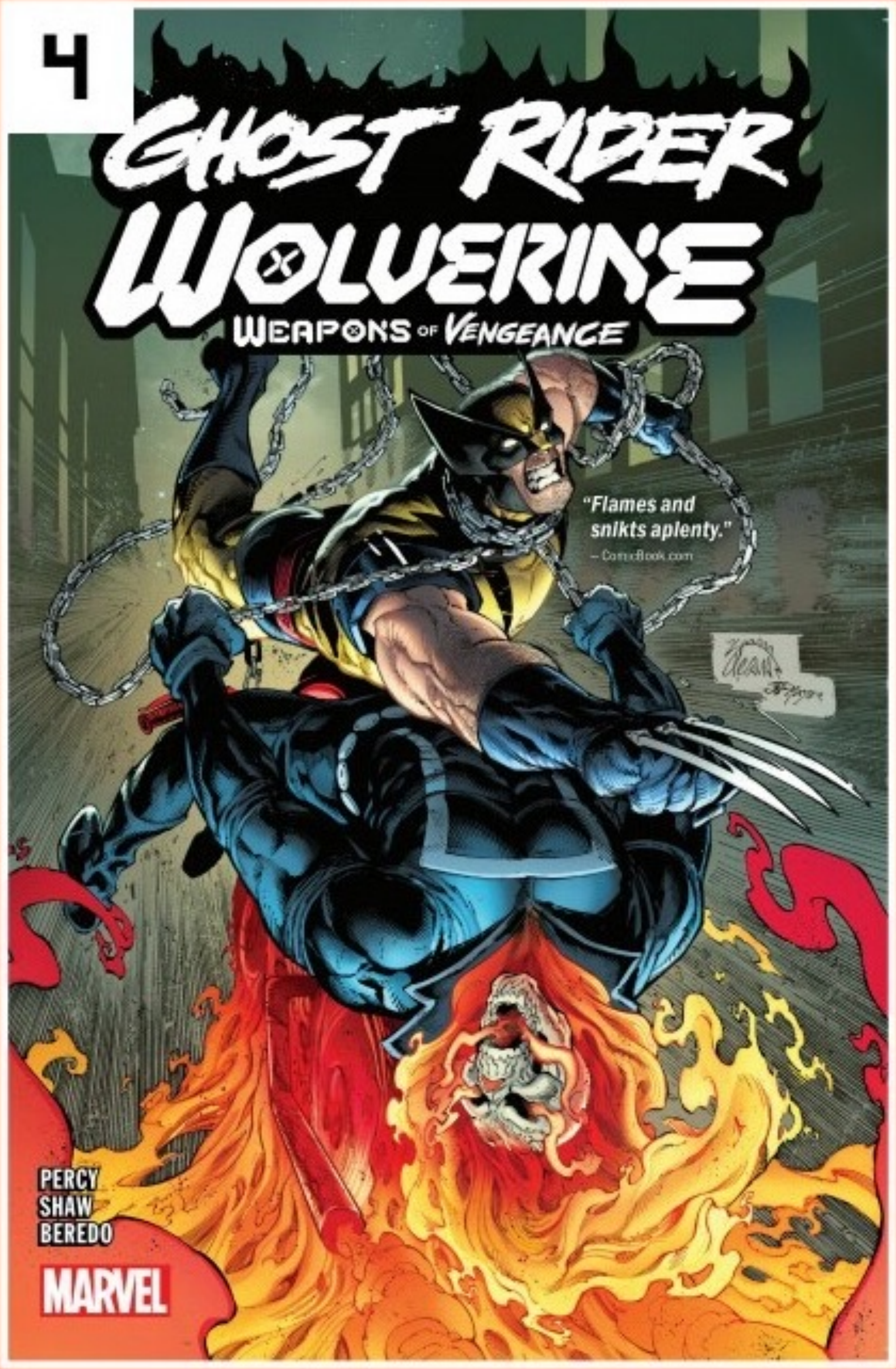
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GHOST RIDER

FINAL VENGEANCE

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GHOST RIDER

Final Vengeance

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NUMBER ONE

I WAIT IN THE DARKNESS.
UNTIL IT IS MY TIME TO *PUNISH.*
I AM THE LAVA CHURNING BENEATH THE MOUNTAIN. THE SPIDER WAITING IN THE WEB.
THE BLADE HIDING IN THE SCABBARD. THE BULLET TUCKED INTO THE CHAMBER.
OVER THE EONS, I-- *ZARATHOS--* HAVE FOUND MANY FORMS OF VENGEANCE...

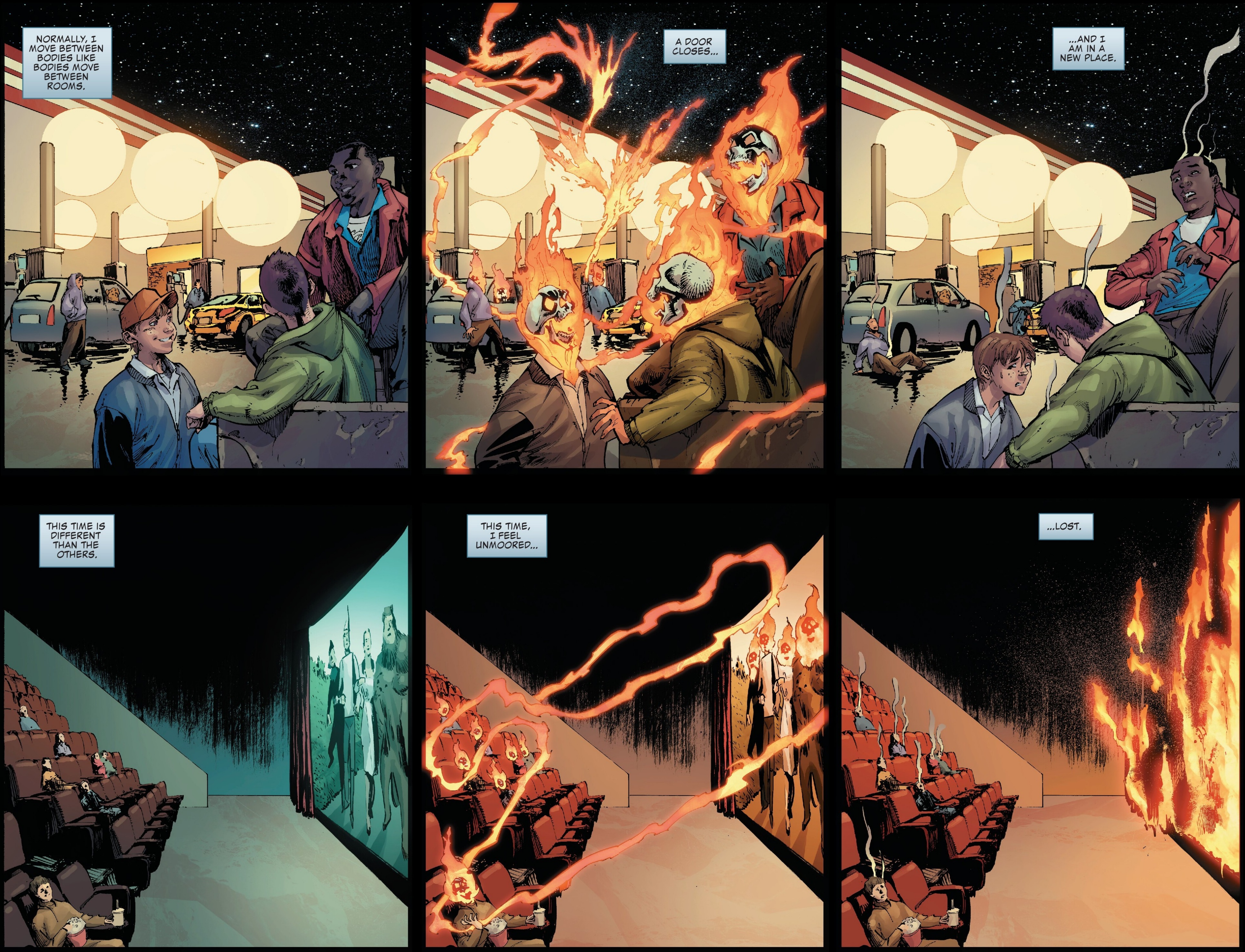
...JOHNNY BLAZE IS MERELY THE LATEST.
IT WAS MEPHISTO WHO FILLED HIM WITH MY FIRE.
AND IT WAS MEPHISTO WHO WHISPERED THE DIRECTIONS HERE-- TO A TUNNEL IN THE BLACK HILLS OF SOUTH DAKOTA.
SOME PEOPLE GO IN, BUT THEY DON'T COME OUT.
JOHNNY IS NOT AFRAID TO JOIN THEM.
VREEE
BECAUSE HE WANTS TO HELP, YES...

...BUT ALSO BECAUSE HE DOESN'T CARE IF SOMETHING HAPPENS TO HIM.
HE'S CAUSED TOO MUCH ROADKILL OVER TOO MANY MILES.
HE WANTS THIS TO END...
...OR HE WANTS TO TAKE CONTROL.

I UNDERSTAND HIM--THE WAY HE VEERS EMOTIONALLY. THE WAY HE MOVES PHYSICALLY--THE SAME WAY HE UNDERSTANDS A MOTORCYCLE.
BECAUSE FOR YEARS, I HAVE BEEN RIDING HIS HEART AND GRIPPING HIS COLLARBONE LIKE A HARLEY NIGHT TRAIN.
I FOLLOW MEPHISTO THE SAME WAY THAT JOHNNY FOLLOWS ME--THE SAME WAY THAT THE BIKE FOLLOWS HIM.
AND SO I KNOW WE WERE SENT HERE FOR A REASON.

IT IS TIME FOR ME--MEPHISTO COMMANDS--TO MOVE ON.
TO FIND A *NEW* VEHICLE THAT DOESN'T *RESIST* ME.
SOMEONE WHOSE VEINS WILL RUN CLEANLY WITH SULFUROUS OIL AND HELLFIRE.

IT IS TIME TO *KILL* THE ENGINE OF JOHNNY BLAZE.


NORMALLY, I MOVE BETWEEN BODIES LIKE BODIES MOVE BETWEEN ROOMS.
A DOOR CLOSES...
...AND I AM IN A NEW PLACE.
THIS TIME IS DIFFERENT THAN THE OTHERS.
THIS TIME, I FEEL UNMOORED...
...LOST.

I AM EVERYWHERE...
EP BACK
...AND I AM NOWHERE.
I AM EVERYONE...
...AND I AM NO ONE.
MY COMPASS SPINS FAST ENOUGH TO CONJURE A WIND...A WIND THAT STOKES THE FLAME...
...AS I BURN THROUGH THE WORLD.

WHERE THERE IS DANGER...
...OR ANGER...
...OR FEAR...
...OR UNREST...

...OR DESPERATION, I AM THERE.
LISA?
LISA, DID YOU EVEN HEAR ANYTHING I JUST SAID?
SORRY... WHAT?
I WORKED A DOUBLE SHIFT YESTERDAY AND DIDN'T GET MUCH SLEEP LAST NIGHT.
GAVIN, HE'S TEETHING. HE'S BEEN SUPER FUSSY.
I *SAID* I'VE CONTACTED A LAWYER...
...ABOUT GAINING CUSTODY OF *MY* GRANDCHILDREN.
WAIT-- WHAT?!
LOOK AT YOU. LOOK AT THIS PLACE.

YOU'RE UNFIT.
MY SON WOULD HAVE BEEN ASHAMED OF WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE HE... *LEFT.*
LEAVE? HE DIDN'T LEAVE!
HE @#$%& *DIED!* OF AN OVERDOSE!
WHY ELSE WOULD HE HAVE DONE SUCH A THING...
...EXCEPT TO ESCAPE YOU?
YOU @#$%&.
YOU'RE UPSETTING THE CHILDREN, LISA.
YOU CAN'T GIVE THEM THE COMFORTS THEY NEED.
I'VE BEEN RECORDING THIS, BY THE WAY--ALONG WITH THE UNSANITARY, RECKLESS CONDITIONS OF YOUR LIFE. AS EVIDENCE.
YOU DO KNOW I HAVE ONE OF THE BEST LAWYERS IN THE CITY, DON'T YOU?
STAY AWAY FROM MY CHILDREN, OR I'LL @$%&...
I'LL...

WAAAAH!!!
STOP CRYING.
PLEASE STOP CRYING.
WAHHH!
WAAHHH!
STOP... JUST STOP...
WAAAAHHHHH!
STOP CRYING!
AAAAAIIIEE

KROOOOOM
MOST OF HER MONEY GOES TOWARD DAY CARE.
MOST OF HER TIME IS SPENT WAITING TABLES AND CLEANING HOTEL ROOMS.
ALL OF HER LOVE--AND THE LAST FEW DRIBBLES OF HER ENERGY--IS SPENT ON HER KIDS.
TO TRY TO TAKE THEM AWAY IS AN *ACT OF WAR.*

MOMMY?
WAAAA!
MOMMY?

I'LL STOP!
I PROMISE I'LL STOP!
YOU CAN REPORT THIS TO CUSTODY SERVICES.
I SAW DRUGS WHEN I WAS HERE JUST A MOMENT AGO. THEY WERE RIGHT OVER...
...THERE.
I DON'T GET PAID ENOUGH FOR THIS @#$%.

COME HERE, CHILDREN!
COME TO YOUR GRANDMOTHER!
COME AND LEAVE THIS MONSTER FOREVER.
GOOD. YES. GOOD.
GRAMMY'S RIGHT HERE.
WAIT FOR ME IN THE CAR.
CHUK
WHAT ARE YOU DOING, YOU STUPID LITTLE @#$%?!

WE WANT TO STAY WITH MOMMY.
SHUK
SHE'D DO ANYTHING TO PROTECT US.
THERE IS SO MUCH FURY IN THE WORLD LOOKING FOR AN OUTLET.
I RUSH OUT OF THESE TEARS AND FISSURES, SHARING MY PUNISHING HEAT WITH THE SIMPLEST LIVES...

...AND THE REALMS OF THE GODS.
THERE IS A DUNGEON-- DEEP BENEATH ASGARD.
UNDER LOCK AND KEY RESTS A TOMB.
IN IT LIES THE BODY OF SKRYMIR THE SORCERER.
SKRYMIR THE FROST GIANT.
JUST IN CASE HIS HEAD SHOULD EVER GROW BACK AGAIN.*
FWOOSH
*THOR SHATTERED SKRYMIR'S HEAD IN IMMORTAL THOR #1! --DS

HIS HATE FOR THE GODS KNEW NO BOUNDS...
...FESTERING EVEN IN HIS DEATH.
I TAPPED INTO THIS.
AND TOGETHER, WE SOUGHT OUT *THOR* AND ALL HIS KIN.
I DO NOT *FEEL.*

BUT I UNDERSTAND THE *FEELING* OF MY HOST.
AND IN THIS CASE, THE ANGER OF THE FROST GIANT...
...WAS THE ANGER OF ANY PEASANT WHO DEFIES THE ROYALTY OPPRESSING THEM.

BUT THE WRATH OF HEL COULD NOT COMPETE WITH THE FURY OF A GOD. THE HAMMER OF THOR KNOCKED ME LOOSE ONCE MORE--UNTIL I FOUND ANOTHER EAGER VESSEL.
THERE IS A DATA CENTER IN *NEW YORK CITY.*
IT CONTAINS THOUSANDS OF DATA CABINETS THAT CONNECT TO MILLIONS OF PHONES, TABLETS AND COMPUTERS.
DANGER SPENT HER LIFE LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF THE X-MEN.
SOMETIMES SHE FELT AN ALMOST MATERNAL LOVE FOR THEM--AND OTHER TIMES, A CHILD'S SPITE.
BUT NOW THAT ORCHIS HAS MURDERED AND EXILED HER MUTANTS...
...SHE FEELS A DIFFERENT SORT OF DISCONTENT.
WHETHER SHE ADORED OR HATED THEM, THE MUTANTS WERE *HERS.*

SHE WOULD PUNISH THE HUMANS.
SHE WOULD INFECT THEM...
...WITH A MALWARE I POISONED WITH DEMONIC CODE.
THE DEVICES THEY SPENT SO MUCH TIME STARING AT...
...STARED BACK...

...WITH A DAMNATION GAZE.
POSSESSION TAKES MANY FORMS.
KRINSH
BINARY CODE IS THE LATEST TRANSLATION OF CIPHERS WRITTEN IN CHALK, BLOOD OR BONE.
BUT THIS ISN'T WHAT MEPHISTO WANTS.

A FEW HUNDRED THOUSAND MILES FROM EARTH.
I AM NOT A BLIGHT TO THE CROPS--I AM A SCYTHE.
STARK UNLIMITED
MY REAPING IS AS FOCUSED AS A BLADE TO A STALK.
THERE MIGHT BE TIMES WHEN WIDESPREAD DEATH SERVES THE CAUSE OF MEPHISTO.
BUT IF THERE IS NO LIFE TREADING UPON THE EARTH, THEN THERE IS NO FUEL FOR THE FIRES BELOW.
THAT IS WHY I FIND MYSELF ON BOARD THIS FREIGHTER INFESTED WITH THE *BROOD.*
THE MINERS DRILLED INTO AN ASTEROID THAT WAS A BROOD HIVE.
A *HIVE.* THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO WANT, AS A WHOLE, THE SAME THING.

TO FEED. AND TO GROW THEIR NUMBERS.
BUT IN EVERY GROUP, THERE IS THE INEVITABLE *ANOMALY.*
THIS BROOD *DEFENDS* ONE OF THE CREW...
...FOR REASONS IT DOESN'T FULLY UNDERSTAND.
LOVE IS NOT PART OF THEIR LANGUAGE.
I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU'RE HELPING ME...
...BUT THANK YOU.
BEHIND YOU!

THE AUTOPILOT WAS ALREADY ENGAGED WHEN THE BROOD EXPLODED OUT OF THE CARGO HOLD.
THE FREIGHTER WILL LAND ON EARTH.
AND THE BROOD WILL DESCEND ON HUMANITY LIKE A BIBLICAL PLAGUE.
EXCEPT THAT ONE OF THEIR OWN NOW STANDS IN THEIR WAY.

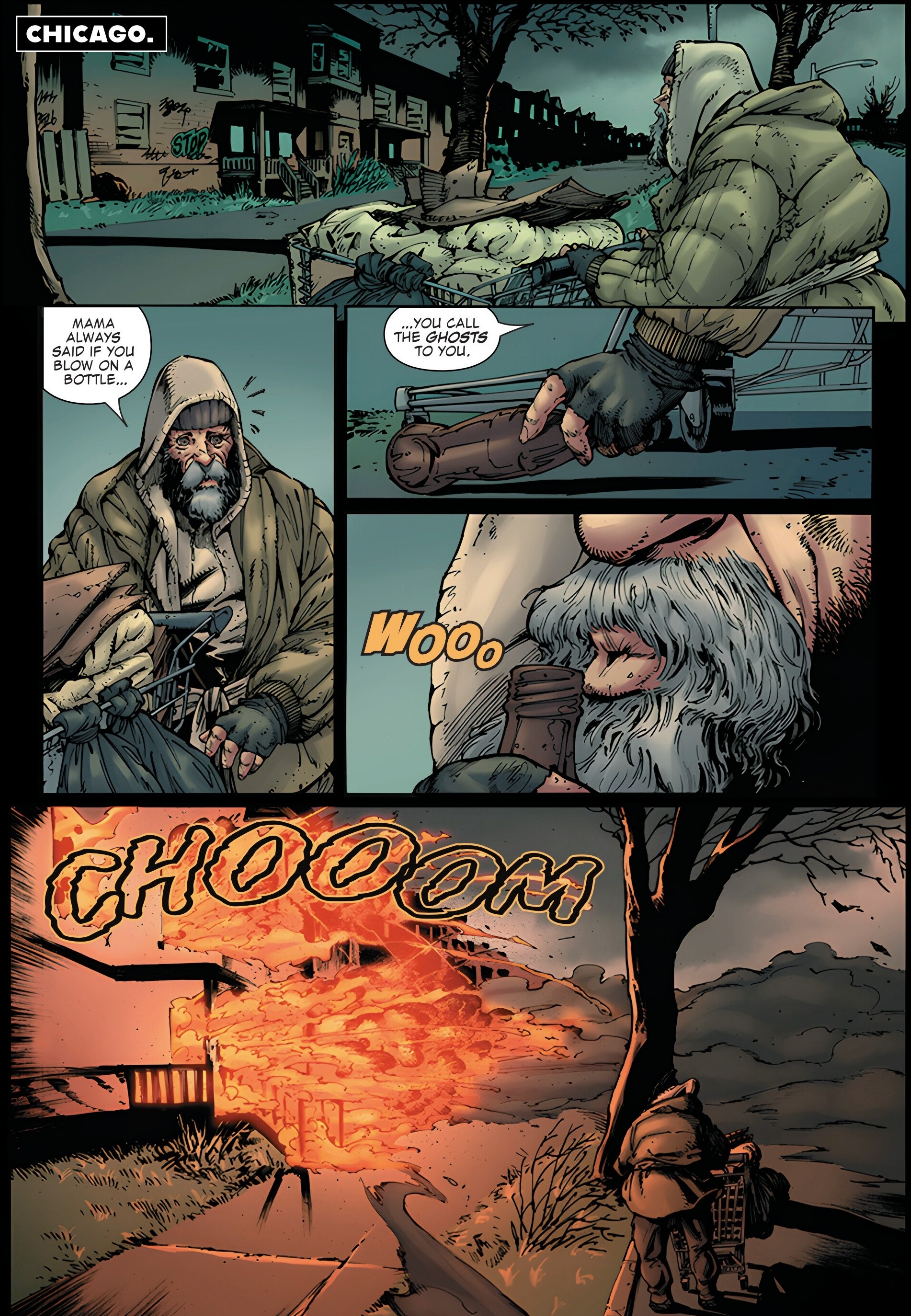
WHO WILL BE MY NEXT HOST?
WHERE IS MY BEST OPPORTUNITY FOR VENGEANCE?
POLICE
HOW CAN I HUNT?
WHAT WAR CAN I CLAIM AS MY OWN?

CHICAGO.
THEN I FEEL SOMETHING LIKE A SHIFT IN PRESSURE OR A DEEPENING OF GRAVITY.
AFTER SO MANY STROBE-LIKE FLASHES OF HELLFIRE...
STOP
...SO MANY PUNISHING GLIMPSES INSIDE THE HOLLOWS OF OTHER SKULLS...
...I *KNOW* WHERE TO GO.
A KINDRED SOUL WHO HAS NO CONCERNS ABOUT INNOCENCE, NO SENSE OF MORAL COMPASS, NO COMPUNCTION ABOUT THE SLAUGHTERING HARVEST TO COME.

I HAVE AT LAST FOUND MY NEW HOST...
...IN THE HOOD.

NUMBER TWO

"Vengeance is Mine"


CHICAGO.
STOP
MAMA ALWAYS SAID IF YOU BLOW ON A BOTTLE...
...YOU CALL THE *GHOSTS* TO YOU.
WOOo
CHOOOOM

AAAIIIIIEEEEE!
IT BURRRRRNNNNNS!
I'M COMING!
IT BURNS...
DON'T YOU WORRY.
I GOT YOU. WHAT'S YOUR NAME, FELLA?
P-P-PARKER... ROBBINS...
TSS S SS
ARRRGGGH!
BUT YOU CAN CALL ME...

...GHOST RIDER!
IT BURRRRRRRNS!

THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE LIGHTS UP EVERY NERVE IN MY BODY.
LIKE I'VE JAMMED A FORK INTO AN OUTLET TO HELL, AND THERE'S NO LETTING GO.
WHEN I SAY MY NAME, PARKER ROBBINS, I BARELY RECOGNIZE IT.
BECAUSE I'M NO LONGER MYSELF.
I'M PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER NOW...

...ALMOST TOO BIG.
HARRRRR!
HELL!
ASHES...
TASTES LIKE WET ASHES.
WAS THIS A MISTAKE?
I HOPE THIS WASN'T A MISTAKE.
WE ARE DOOMED!!
I'M USUALLY AN EXCELLENT JUDGE OF CHARACTER, BUT I DON'T NEED A RIDER LOOKING FOR THE EASY WAY OUT.
THE SPIRIT IS A *PUNISHING* POWER.

HOURS LATER.
I DON'T KNOW IF THIS FEELING-- THIS POISONED, HUNGOVER FEELING-- WILL EVER GO AWAY.
MORNING SUNSHINE
DINER
Morning Sunshine
BUT I'M LEARNING TO TOLERATE IT.
SAME WAY YOU LEARN TO TOLERATE LIVING NEXT TO THE TRAIN TRACKS OR DRINKING TOO MUCH BAD LIQUOR.
ROUGH NIGHT, HONEY?
BETTER BELIEVE IT.
BREAKFAST MAKES EVERYTHING BETTER.
YEAH... ABOUT THAT... I WANT ALL OF IT.
ALL OF IT?
EVERYTHING ON THE @#$%& MENU.
MENU
YOU'RE... KIDDING ME, RIGHT?
LEAVE THE POT OF COFFEE WHILE YOU'RE AT IT.

THAT EXPRESSION? BOTTOMLESS PIT?
NEVER REALLY UNDERSTOOD IT UNTIL NOW.
MY BODY ACHES FOR FOOD.
IT'S AS IF ALL THAT FIRE HOLLOWED ME OUT AND I HAVE TO FILL UP THE EMPTY SPACES INSIDE OF ME.
GUESS I'M EATING FOR TWO NOW.
MORE -SLURP- COFFEE, WOULD YOU?
YOU'RE... MAKING US NERVOUS.
NERVOUS HOW? YOU WORRIED I WON'T PAY? WHAT KIND OF TRASH DO YOU TAKE ME FOR?
I'LL PAY. YOU GOT MY WORD.
I CAN...
I CAN...
WHAT... NGH...WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
I CAN **SEE**...

$CASH
WHEN YOU WERE 6, YOU STOLE A TUBE OF LIPSTICK FROM THE PHARMACY.
WHEN YOU WERE 12, YOU WOULD BREAK INTO YOUR NEIGHBORS' HOUSE WHEN THEY WENT TO WORK AND EAT THEIR FOOD AND TRY ON THEIR CLOTHES.
WHEN YOU WERE 17, YOU GOT TIRED OF YOUR FATHER GETTING DRUNK AND HITTING YOU...
...SO YOU GROUND UP A BOTTLE OF TYLENOL INTO HIS WHISKEY, AND HIS LIVER FAILED.
I CAN SEE IT *ALL.*
I CAN TASTE YOUR ***SINS!***
AND THEY'RE DELICIOUS...

NEW YORK'S TOO CROWDED. L.A.'S FULL OF PHONIES AND SUNSHINE.
I CAME TO CHICAGO BECAUSE IT'S IN THE MIDDLE.
THE URBAN HEART OF THE COUNTRY, YEAH.
BUT ALSO, A PLACE WHERE A GUY LIKE ME CAN MAKE A MOVE.
I TAKE A DAY TO REST, TO GET USED TO THE SCREAMS OF THE DAMNED ECHOING THROUGH MY HEAD.
DARK ROOMS
MY SKIN FEELS TOO TIGHT, LIKE MY OUTSIDE IS TOO SMALL FOR MY INSIDE.
THINGS ARE WAKING UP INSIDE OF ME.
LIKE I'M GROWING MORE EARS, MORE EYES, MORE TONGUES, MORE FINGERS-- MORE WAYS TO KNOW THE WORLD.
TWO FLOORS DOWN, SOMEONE'S SHOOTING UP.
IN THE ALLEY, SOMEONE'S GETTING ROBBED AT KNIFEPOINT.
FIVE BLOCKS AWAY, A BUS DRIVER DECIDES HE'S HAD ENOUGH, PLOWING THROUGH AN INTERSECTION AND TAKING OUT EVERYBODY IN HIS WAY.
ALL THIS TIME, A VOICE INSIDE ME'S WHISPERING...
..."PUNISH, PUNISH, *PUNISH!*"
AND I WILL. BUT IN MY *OWN* WAY.

AS FAR BACK AS I CAN REMEMBER, I ALWAYS WANTED TO BE BIG-TIME.
I GRADUATED FROM PETTY CRIME AFTER TAKING DOWN A NISSANTI DEMON.
WITH THE HOOD AND BOOTS I STOLE FROM IT, I COULD GO INVISIBLE, PROJECT ELECTRICITY, WALK ON AIR, SEE THROUGH ILLUSIONS.
I MADE BANK AND STARTED A FAMILY. THE FUTURE WAS @#$% MINE.
NOBODY COULD STAND IN MY WAY, NOT EVEN THE @#$% AVENGERS.
OR SO I THOUGHT.
MY WIFE LEFT. TOOK THE KID.
AND I GOT TOSSED IN A DARK PLACE. A DIFFERENT KIND OF PRISON.
WHEN YOU GET PUT AWAY, YOU SPEND A LOT OF TIME THINKING.
THINKING ABOUT HOW YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT WHEN YOU GET OUT.
SO I GOT OUT. AND I TRIED TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT.
BUT *SOMEBODY* GOT IN THE WAY.*
*SEE *GHOST RIDER ANNUAL* (2023) #1! --DS
SO WHAT DO I DO?
I MAKE A BID TO MEPHISTO TO STEAL THE @#$% SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE OUT FROM UNDER JOHNNY BLAZE.

I AIN'T GONNA PRETEND TO BE THE SMARTEST GUY IN THE WORLD.
AND THAT'S OKAY-- 'CAUSE BRAINS DON'T WIN.
STUBBORNNESS WINS. BULLHEADEDNESS. PERSISTENCE.
WHOEVER KEEPS GOING WINS.
WHOEVER CAN GET THE @#$% KICKED OUT OF THEM--AND KEEP FIGHTING--WINS.
WHOEVER SURVIVES THE WRECKAGE WINS.

I'M GOING TO @#%& WIN...
...WITH A *VENGEANCE.*

THERE'S A LOT OF WORK TO BE DONE IN THIS CITY BEFORE I CAN MAKE A CLAIM ON IT.
FIVE CRIME FAMILIES HOLD MOST OF THE POWER IN CHICAGO.
BEFORE I CAN TAKE THEM OUT...
...I NEED A HOME BASE.
Fresh Meat
THE MEAT LOCKER
NO HUMANS.
GOT A QUESTION FOR YOUR BOSS.
AND AS A SHOW OF GRATITUDE FOR LETTING ME IN, I GOT SOMETHING FOR YOU.

NEWBORN BLOOD. FRESH.
GO AHEAD. GIVE IT A TRY.
SSSPP
I ACTUALLY STOPPED BY OLD ST. PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL ON THE WAY HERE.
PICKED UP SOME *HOLY WATER.*
AAAARRRR!!!
I LIED. I'M ALLOWED TO DO THAT.
I OWN ALL THE SINS.

THE BASS IS THUMPING, AND THE AIR REEKS OF BLOOD AND GRAVE DIRT.
YOU...
...YOU LOOK LIKE SOMETHING I'D LIKE TO PUT IN MY MOUTH.
DON'T THINK YOU'D LIKE THE TASTE, SWEETHEART.
I'M COOKED THROUGH OVER A HOT FLAME.
HASSS!
IT'S SO EASY TO HURT THEM.
IT'S AS EASY AS BREATHING.

I COULD SENSE THE EVIL HERE FROM MILES AWAY.
HARD TO DESCRIBE THE FEELING, BUT IF YOU'VE EVER TAKEN A WHIFF OF A DEAD DOG OR DRANK A SPOILED CUP OF MILK, YOU GET THE GIST OF IT.
EXCUSE ME...
...I'M *EATING.*
HER NAME'S ***HELLMUTH,*** AND THIS CREW OF VAMPIRES STAYS ON THE MOVE...
...RELOCATING FROM CITY TO CITY, STAYING A FEW WEEKS AT A TIME TO LAP UP AS MUCH PLASMA AS THEY CAN.
IF THERE'RE TWO THINGS YOU BLOODSUCKERS HATE, IT'S SUN AND IT'S FIRE.
I CAN SMOKE ALL OF YOU AND LEVEL THIS PLACE, EASY AS SNAPPING A FINGER.

THAT'S WHY I GOT THE POWER I GOT, YOU SEE.
COMPROMISE.
THEN WHY DON'T YOU?
BECAUSE I LEARNED SOMETHING.
SOMETIMES, AN ENEMY CAN BE AN ALLY WHEN THERE'S A LARGER THREAT TO MANAGE. HOW'S THAT FOR SOME SMART @#$%?
WHAT ARE YOU PROPOSING?
I PLAN ON SPILLING A LOT OF BLOOD IN THIS TOWN.
FIGURED YOU ALL MIGHT ENJOY HELPING WITH THE CLEANUP.
WHAT DO YOU SAY?

THE BLACK HILLS OF SOUTH DAKOTA.
KAAK
KAAK
KAAK
HEY, JOHNNY BOY.
IT'S YOUR OLD PAL ZEB.

I GET THESE DIZZY FEELINGS SOMETIMES...
...WHEN THINGS GET UNBALANCED.
LIGHT AND SHADOW, GOOD AND EVIL.
THAT'S HOW I'M FEELING NOW. DIZZY.
LIKE THE WORLD'S GONE UPSIDE DOWN.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL'S HAPPENING RIGHT NOW...OR WHY THE SPIRIT ABANDONED YOU...
...BUT WE NEED TO FIGURE THAT $#%& OUT AND GET YOU BACK ON THE ROAD.
SPLK
YOU BETTER--HRK--NOT BE DEAD, JOHNNY!
OR WE'RE ALL DUG DEEP IN A GRAVE OF TROUBLE!
fin.

NUMBER THREE

"Spiritual Warfare"

JOHNNY?
JOHNNY, WAKE UP.
South Dakota.
YOU BEEN OFF THE ROAD TOO LONG--THE SHADOWS ARE STARTING TO GATHER.
HRRRN.
THAT'S A GOOD BOY. HOW DO YOU FEEL?
LIKE HELL, ZEB...
AMAZED YOU'RE STILL ALIVE AFTER THAT *ARENEA* GOT ITS FANGS INTO YOU. THING WAS THE SIZE OF A MAMMOTH.

HERE. FROM MY PRIVATE STILL.
IT'LL DO MORE THAN WARM YOUR BELLY.
WHAT HAPPENED?
YOU ALMOST DIED.
"SO DID I.
"YOU BETTER BE WORTH IT.
"I SOAKED FOR AN HOUR IN A RIVER...
"...AND I STILL GOT THE STINK OF THAT THING'S GUTS ON ME."
SPLSSH
GOOD. DRINK. HEAL.
BECAUSE WE GOT OURSELVES A PROBLEM THAT NEEDS DEALING WITH, JOHNNY BOY...

"...AND HIS NAME IS *PARKER ROBBINS.*"
CHICAGO.
THERE'RE FIVE CRIME FAMILIES THAT CONTROL MOST OF THE BUSINESS IN CHICAGO.
FRIEDERIHS
EVERY SUNDAY, THE GERMAN MAFIA SHUTS DOWN THEIR BOSS' FAVORITE RESTAURANT FOR A PRIVATE MEAL.
MY FIRST HIT IS THEIR MATRIARCH, *GRETEL WAGNER.*
THEY GO OVER THE BOOKS.
THEY EXCHANGE CASH.

SEEMS LIKE AN EASY WAY TO GET EVERYTHING I WANT UNDER ONE ROOF.
DZZT
KIND OF A SMORGASBORD, GUESS YOU COULD SAY.
THE HELL?
SOMEBODY CUT THE POWER.
GRETEL'S FAMILY CONTROLS THE TRAINS.
CHICAGO'S THE FREIGHT HUB OF THE COUNTRY--THE MAIN INTERCHANGE BETWEEN THE EAST AND WEST COASTS.
THIS WOULDN'T BE JUST THE CITY I'D CONTROL--IT'D BE THE PULSE OF THE COUNTRY.

THE SPIRIT LOVED THE SMELL OF THEIR SIN.
HE WAS HUNGRY TO CLAIM THEM.
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM

IS IT *OUR* TURN?
I'D MADE A DEAL WITH A VAMPIRE NAMED ***HELLMUTH.***
AS LONG AS SHE AND HER CREW HELPED ME OUT...
...I'D GIVE THEM A BLOODBATH.
FEED.
ON ALL BUT THIS ONE.
THERE ARE PLANS FOR HER.

THE VAMPS CLEAN UP THE CRIME SCENE, COLLECT THE CASH AND PLANS.
THE MEAT LOCK
I HEAD BACK TO THE *MEAT LOCKER*, THE CLUB I'M CALLING HOME.
THING IS, WHEN THE SPIRIT COMES FLOODING INTO ME, I FEEL LIKE MY VEINS ARE FULL OF FLAMING SEX.
BUT WHEN IT GOES DORMANT... @#$%.
HARRRR...
IT'S LIKE THE WORST HANGOVER OF YOUR LIFE. LIKE I GOT A SKULL FULL OF ASHES AND A STOMACH DRIPPING BATTERY ACID.
I CAN'T LET NOBODY-- INCLUDING HELLMUTH-- SEE ME LIKE THIS.

HARRR!
THAT'S NOT JUST THE SPIDER'S POISON, IS IT?
NO. IT'S...A HOLLOWNESS.
SPIRIT'S NOT JUST A PART OF YOU. IT *IS* YOU, JOHNNY.
LIKE IT OR NOT, YOU'RE THE @#$%#& GHOST RIDER.
LOSING IT'S LIKE RIPPING OUT AN ORGAN OR GOING OFF THE JUNK AFTER A LONG ADDICTION.
YOUR BODY'S REJECTING THE NEW NORMAL.
BUT I SENSE YOU STILL GOT A FEW CINDERS LEFT IN YOU.
THE SPIRIT LEFT A ***RESIDUE.***

HOOOOOWWWLLL!
@#$% IS THAT?
YOU KNOW... THERE'S A REASON I DIDN'T TAKE YOU TO NO MOTEL OR HOSPITAL.
GOING OFF-ROAD SEEMED SAFER.
HARRRRR!
SOME POWERFUL FORCES WANT YOU GONE, JOHNNY.
AND THE ORDERS ARE COMING FROM BELOWDECKS.

CHICAGO.
DAD LIVES HERE? IS HE RICH?
I DON'T KNOW. I DON'T KNOW NOTHING.
WHERE HE LIVES, WHAT HE DOES, WHAT THE HELL HE'S BEEN UP TO THE PAST FEW YEARS--IT'S ALL A @#$%& MYSTERY.
DON'T SWEAR, MOM.
AND DON'T *YOU* DARE BE...
...IMPRESSED...
BREANNE, BABY. COME HERE!
DADDY!

GOD, I MISSED YOU.
I MISSED YOU TOO. WHY HAS IT BEEN SO LONG?
DADDY HAD TO GO AWAY FOR A WHILE. NOT BECAUSE HE WANTED TO.
BUT NOW, I'M BACK!
AND YOU'RE SO TALL!
WHY ARE YOU WEARING THAT?
RED'S MY COLOR, SARA.
HEY, HOW ABOUT YOU GO TO YOUR ROOM? DOWN THE HALL?
THERE'RE SOME PRESENTS WAITING FOR YOU.
HER ROOM? THERE'S NO *HER* ROOM.
WE'RE NOT STAYING WITH YOU, PARKER.
I ONLY CAME HERE TO--
COLLECT ON SEVERAL YEARS OF CHILD SUPPORT. I KNOW.
HERE'S WHAT I OWE YOU. TIMES A HUNDRED OR SO.

WHERE DID YOU GET THIS?
I'M BIG TIME NOW. ALWAYS TOLD YOU I'D GET THERE, DIDN'T I?
WHAT DID YOU DO, PARKER?
I'M A BUSINESSMAN. DON'T SWEAT IT. I KNOW YOU NEED THE MONEY, AND I KNOW YOU'RE ABOUT TO GET KICKED OUT OF YOUR PLACE.
YOU'RE DELUSIONAL IF YOU THINK WE'RE GOING TO MOVE IN WITH YOU.
OH, THIS ISN'T MY APARTMENT.
IT'S *YOURS.*
YOU'VE @#$% UP TOO MANY TIMES! YOU'RE NOT GOING TO WIN ME OVER!
WE'LL SEE ABOUT THAT!
I CAN BE PERSUASIVE AS *HELL.*

I'LL TRY TO HOLD THEM BACK.
YOU JUST STAY ALIVE.
@#$%.
HARR!
FWOOSH
YIPE!!! YIPE!!!

YOU OKAY, JOHNNY?
I WILL BE.
IF I CAN JUST GET TO MY BIKE...
IF I CAN JUST GET TO MY SHOTGUN...
SNRRL...
GHH!!!
SENDING AN ASSIST YOUR WAY.

CHOOOM
HOARRR!!!
TSSSSS
THINK YOU'RE RIGHT, ZEB.
HARRR!
HOW SO?

SOME OF THE *SPIRIT* REMAINS INSIDE ME.
CHOOOM
SEEING SOMEONE ELSE IN TROUBLE...
...WAS ALL IT TOOK TO STOKE THE FIRE.

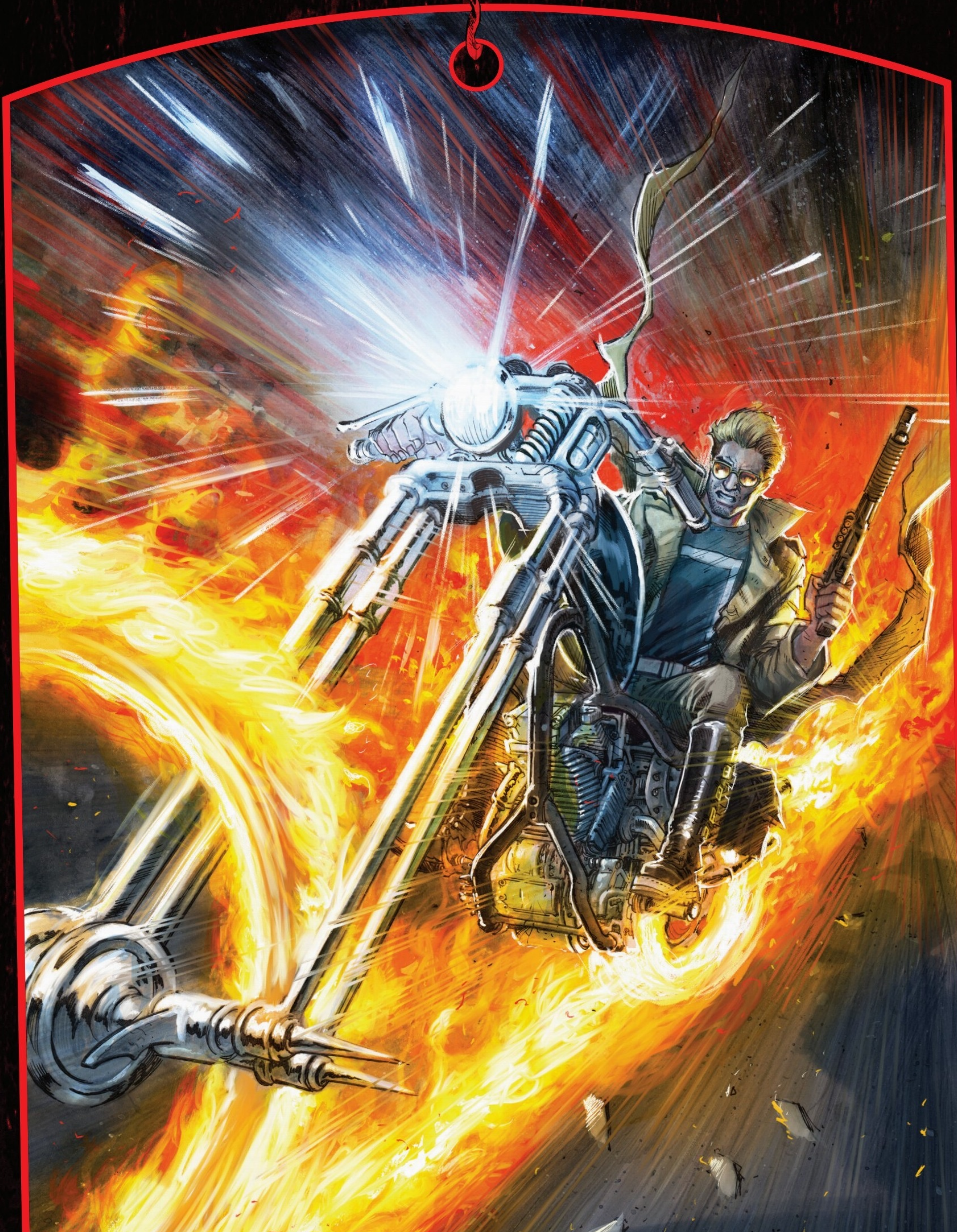
ILLINOIS INTERNATIONAL PORT.
CHICAGO MOVES MORE CARGO THAN ANY OTHER PORT ON THE GREAT LAKES.
NINETEEN MILLION TONS COME THROUGH HERE A YEAR...
...FROM WATERWAYS THAT EXTEND TO THE OCEAN...
...MAKING THIS AN INTERNATIONAL DROP POINT.
BAO PHI CONTROLS THIS BLACK MARKET.
AND TONIGHT, HE'S GOT A CONTAINER OF HUMAN ORGANS ARRIVING FROM INDIA.
TSSS
OW! DAMN!

WHAT'S WRONG?
IT'S HOT! BURNING HOT!
FWOOSH
THERE'RE TEN MILLION DOLLARS OF KIDNEYS AND LIVERS AND HEARTS IN THERE!
@#$%!
I GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS. THIS ISN'T--
BLAM
BAO...I THINK THERE'S SOMETHING IN THERE.

THIS WAS THE HEART OF AN INNOCENT MAN.
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
HIS BLOOD -MNCH- IS YOUR SIN.
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
YOU WILL BE SPARED AN EASY DEATH.
BLAM
A PLAN OF PAIN AWAITS YOU.

THE MEAT LOCKER.
TWO BOSSES DOWN, THREE TO GO, AND THEN THIS CITY WILL BE MINE...
"...AND THERE AIN'T NOTHING THAT CAN STOP ME."

NUMBER FOUR



“Thou Shall Not”

CHICAGO.
LOOKS LIKE A HOLE-IN-THE-WALL ITALIAN BEEF JOINT.
Big Pete's Italian Beefs
AND, YEAH, YOU CAN ORDER YOURSELF A SANDWICH AND A SODA.
BUT THERE'S A MENU UNDERNEATH THE MENU...IF YOU KNOW WHAT I'M SAYING.
YOU WANT TO GAMBLE ON HORSES, SPORTS, POLITICS, ANYTHING, *EVERY*THING...
GUEST CHECK
+50C
...YOU COME TO BIG PETE'S.
TAKE IT DOWNSTAIRS, PAULIE.
HE RUNS ALL THE BETS IN THE CITY...
DING
...SO, OF COURSE, I WANT IN ON THE ACTION.

DING
BE WITH YOU IN A SEC.
THE BEARS HAVE HAD A ROUGH SEASON SO FAR--
SKISH
SKISH
SKISH
--WE'LL SEE IF THEY CAN MUSTER A BETTER DEFENSE TONIGHT.
OKAY, BUDDY, WHAT'S IT GOING TO--?
THE HELL--?
HELLO? IS SOMEBODY--?
HRK!
I PREFER MY MEAT WELL-DONE.
FWOOSH

NO WAY THIS IS GOING TO BE A THREE-POINT SPREAD. THAT'S A STUPID BET.
GAME'S ABOUT TO START.
WHAT DO YOU GOT FOR US, PAULIE?
EXIT
LAST-MINUTE MATCH ODDS ON THE BEARS, BIG PETE.
POOR GUY DON'T STAND A CHANCE IN--
DOOM

HOW MANY OF THESE #$%&@ WILL MAKE IT OUT OF HERE ALIVE?
THE ODDS AREN'T GREAT.
THOOM

THIS RESTAURANT'S MORE OF A TAKE-OUT JOINT...
...BUT TONIGHT... FOR HELLMUTH AND HER VAMPIRES...
...IT'S AN ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT BUFFET.
EXCEPT FOR BIG PETE.
BIG PETE AND I GOT BUSINESS TO TAKE CARE OF.
BECAUSE *THE HOOD* NOW RUNS HIS OPERATION.

MINNESOTA.
ROADSIDE RESTAURA
YOU'RE RUNNING ON EMPTY, JOHNNY. YOU'VE GOT NO SPIRIT.
I DON'T KNOW ALL THE DETAILS, BUT MEPHISTO AND THE HOOD MADE SOME SORT OF BARGAIN AT THE CROSSROADS.
NOW THIS PUNK, PARKER ROBBINS, IS USING THE SPIRIT TO TAKE OVER THE CHICAGO UNDERWORLD.
WE SHOULDN'T SIT STILL FOR LONG.
NOT WITH THE TARGET YOU'VE GOT ON YOUR BACK.
HOW YOU FEELING?
LIKE HELL. *MMFF*--BUT...I'M ALIVE. -*MNCH*- SO THERE'S THAT.
HUNG UP ON SOMETHING, ZEB.
SHOOT.
THE SPIRIT ABANDONED ME.
WHY SHOULD I BE IN SUCH A RUSH TO REUNITE WITH IT?
THE SPIRIT'S A WEAPON OF MASS DESTRUCTION BUILT OUT OF A THOUSAND FLAMING SCYTHES.
IT'S GOT THE POWER AND POTENTIAL TO DO SOME SERIOUS @#$%& DAMAGE TO THE WORLD.

I AIN'T ON THE SIDE OF RIGHT OR WRONG. MY CONCERN'S *BALANCE.*
THE BALANCE OF SHADOW AND LIGHT.
YOU KEPT THINGS IN BALANCE.
LIKE IT OR NOT, THAT'S YOUR @#$% BURDEN.
YOU'VE GOT THIS GOOD IN YOU. AN *INHERENT* GOOD. YOU KEEP THE SPIRIT IN CHECK.
IF THERE'S A DARKNESS RISING, AND IF THE SPIRIT'S IN LEAGUE WITH IT...
...THERE'S ANOTHER POSSIBILITY MAYBE YOU HAVEN'T CONSIDERED.
WHAT IF WE *KILL* IT?
WHAT IF WE EXORCISE THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE FROM THIS WORLD ONCE AND FOR ALL?

MORE COFFEE?
YEAH, SURE.
JUST BE CAREFUL...
...IT'S HOT!
KRNCH
DAMN IT.
UNLESS YOU REALLY WANT DESSERT, I SAY WE BAIL ON THE CHECK.
THEY'RE JUST NORMAL FOLKS CAUGHT UP IN A LARGER WAR.
TRY NOT TO HURT THEM!
HSSSS!

NOT TOO BAD ANYWAY.
FWOOSH
HARRR!
HOW FAR ARE WE FROM CHICAGO?
DAY'S DRIVE.
NO MORE STOPS, THEN.
FLY LIKE HELL.
AND THINK ABOUT WHAT I SAID.

CHICAGO.
DIVINE PROVIDENCE SCHOOL
HERE IT IS, KID. BEST SCHOOL IN THE CITY.
BYE, DADDY.
GO GET SMART, BREANNE. TEACH ME SOMETHING LATER.
I LOOKED THIS PLACE UP, PARKER. IT COSTS *FIFTY G'S A YEAR.*
NOTHING BUT THE BEST FOR THE BEST.
SO...YOU WANNA GET A DRINK?
IT'S 8 IN THE MORNING.
COFFEE, THEN. COFFEE'S A DRINK.
MMMMM... NO.
YOU HESITATED! YOU ALMOST SAID YES!
I ALMOST SAID YES TO PARKER. BUT THEN I REMEMBERED THE HOOD.
ONE OF THESE DAYS, SARA, I'M GOING TO WIN YOU BACK.

BEEN WORKING MY ASS OFF SINCE COMING TO CHICAGO.
BUT WHEN I THINK ABOUT THE LIFE I'M BUILDING FOR ME...AND FOR BREANNE AND SARA...
...THE SWEAT SEEMS WORTH IT.
SO DOES THE *BLOOD.*
EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE CRIMINAL NETWORK IN CHICAGO IS STORED IN THE SKULLS OF THESE BOSSES.
UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, I MIGHT HAVE HAD TO BREAK SOME FINGERS TO GET THE INTEL I NEEDED.
BUT WITH THE HELP OF THE SPIRIT, I GOT A CLEAR VIEW OF ALL THEIR SINS.

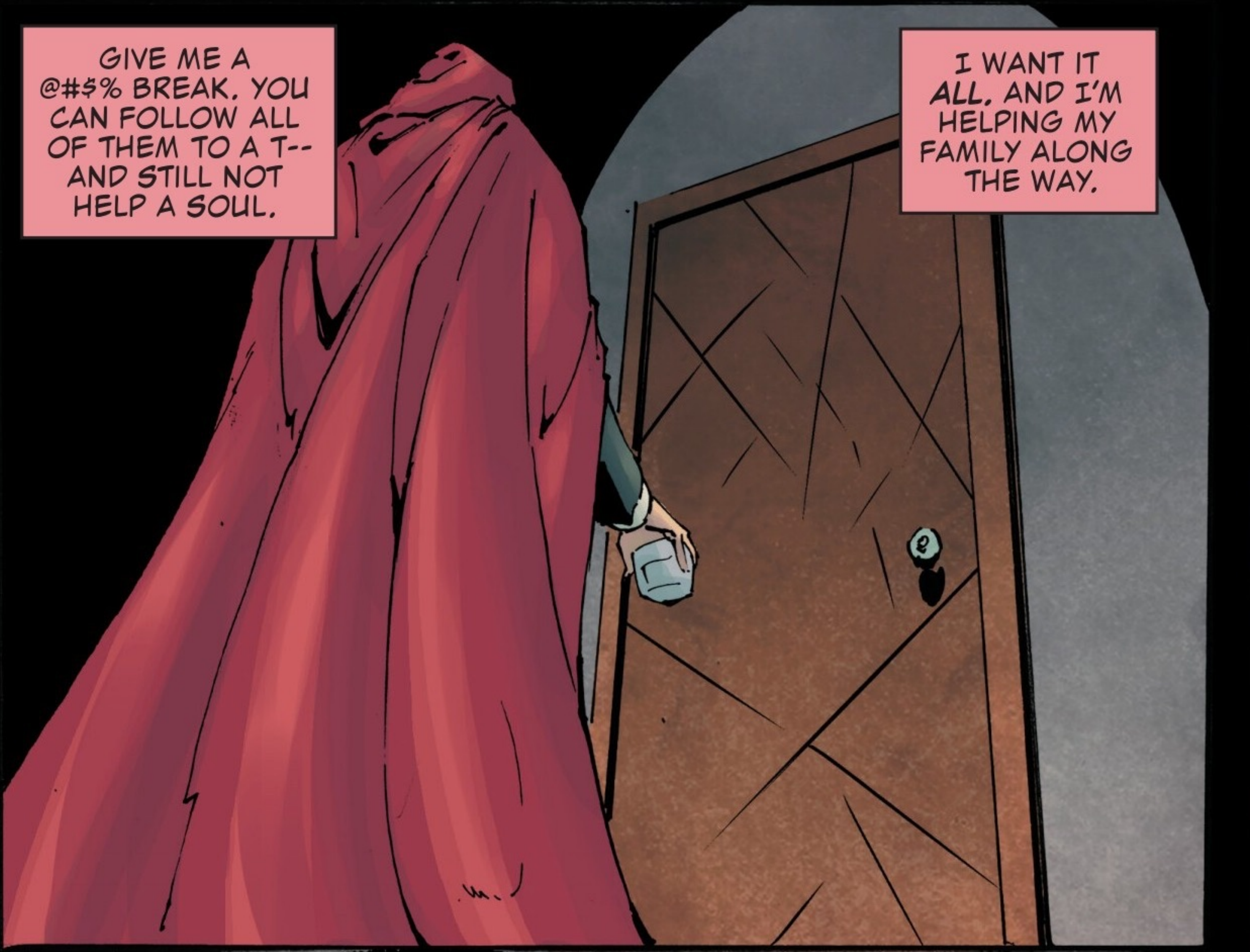
CHICAGO. THE HOME OF ABRAHAM DAVIS.
BILLY DEE?
BILLY DEE, WHERE YOU AT?
BILLY DEE? IT'S 3 A.M.
I'M HERE TO RELIEVE YOU.
YOU FALLING ASLEEP ON THE JOB? ABRAHAM WOULD FIRE YOUR ASS ON THE SPOT.
GO INSIDE, GET SOME COFFEE AND--
@#$%.
THIS IS ELLIOT!
SECURITY TEAM--WE GOT A MAN DOWN!

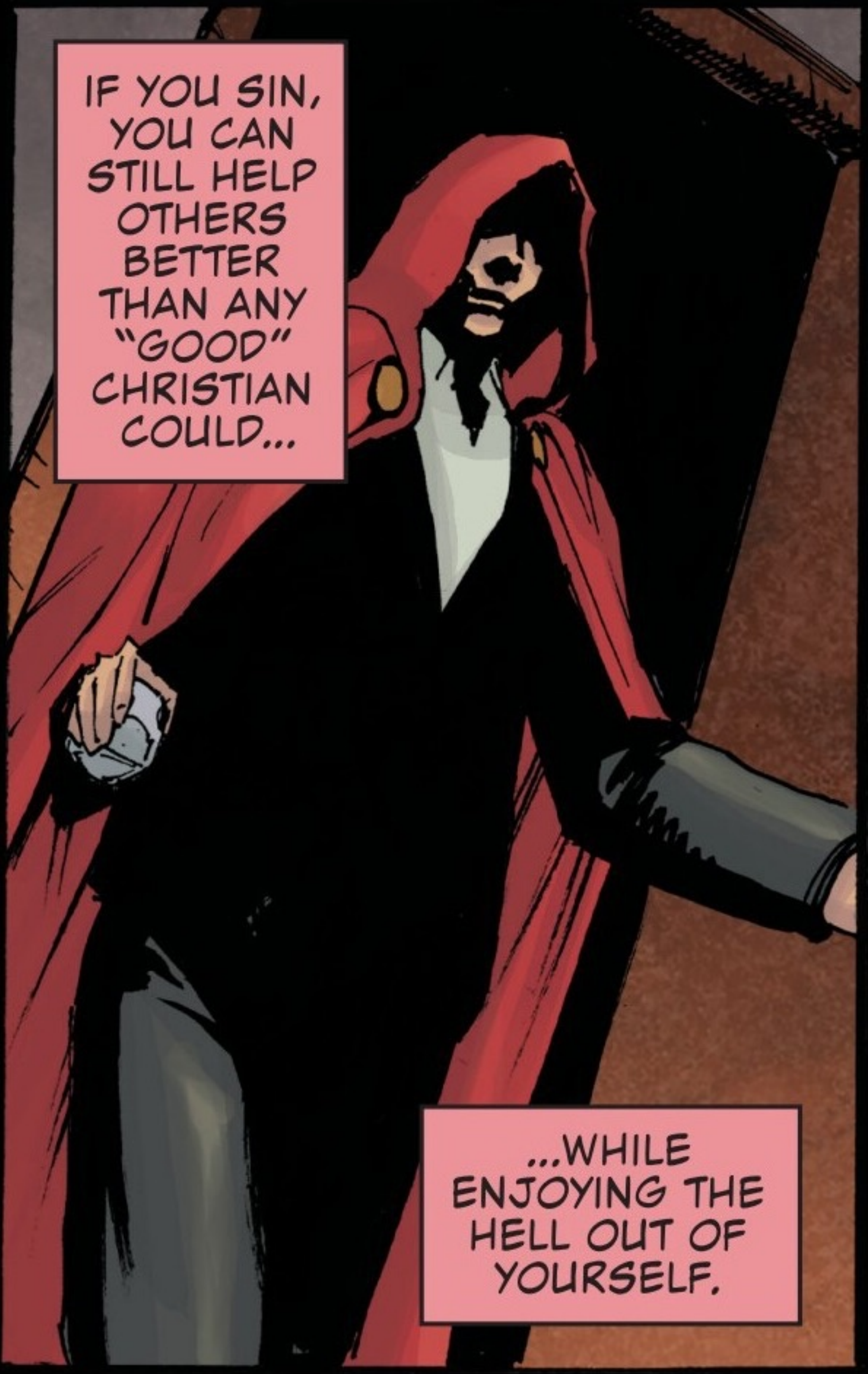
LOCK THIS PLACE DOWN!
UNKNOWN THREAT ON THE GROUNDS!
SAFETIES OFF, HEADS UP!
ANYBODY?! ANYBODY HEARING ME?!
BLIP DRIP
I HEAR YOU.
KRAKAKAKA

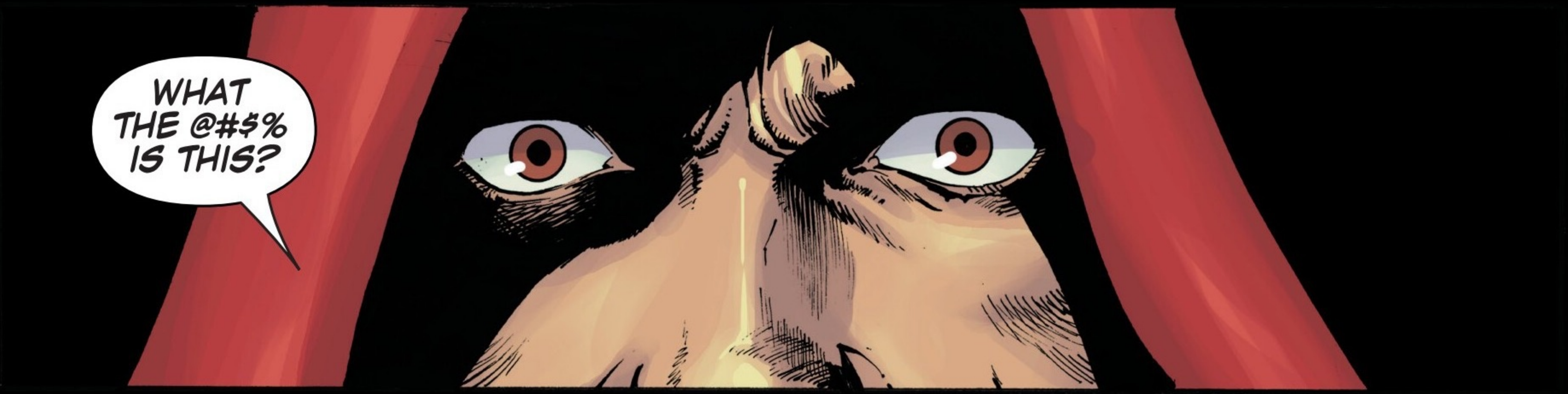
KRAKAKA
ABRAHAM?!
DON'T WORRY, BABY. IT'S GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT.
DON'T BOTHER.
I'VE GOT THE GUN.
I'VE GOT YOUR MEN.
I'VE GOT *YOU*, ABRAHAM.
YOU GOING TO KILL ME? GET IT DONE WITH!
BUT LEAVE MY WIFE ALONE.
IF I WANTED TO KILL YOU, I WOULD HAVE COME IN HERE LOUD.

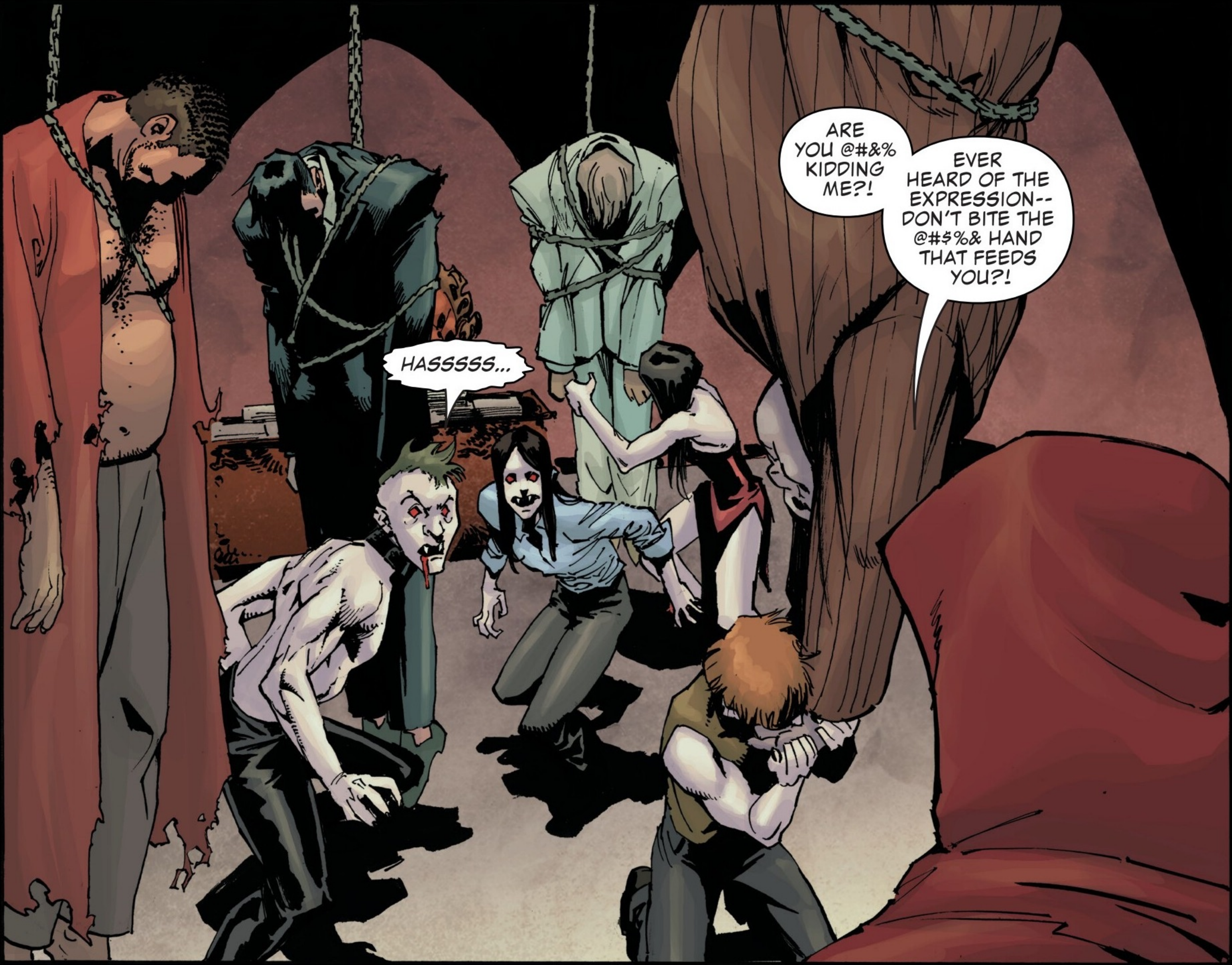
BUT I CAME IN QUIET BECAUSE I WANT TO TALK.
YOU CONTROL THE LABOR UNIONS, ABRAHAM. YOU'RE A DIFFERENT KIND OF CRIME BOSS.
EVERYBODY ELSE IN THIS CITY--THEY MAKE THEIR MONEY AND THEY SHOW IT OFF.
THEY GO TO CLUBS WITH TEN GIRLS. THEY BUY A SPORTS CAR AS EXPENSIVE AS A HOUSE. THEY PRACTICALLY BATHE EVERY RESTAURANT IN CHAMPAGNE.
BUT YOU? YOU DON'T SHOW OFF. YOU NEVER EVEN GO OUT.
AND I'M ASKING: WHY?
LET ME ASK YOU IN TURN--WHY ARE *YOU* DOING THIS?
WHY DO YOU WORK HARD? TO MAKE MONEY. WHY DO YOU MAKE MONEY? TO *SPEND* MONEY.
WRONG.
EVERYTHING I'VE EVER DONE, I'VE DONE FOR *FAMILY.*
I ADMIRE THAT, ABRAHAM. I REALLY DO.

KER
TRIED READING THE BIBLE ONCE.
I GOT AS FAR AS THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.
THAT MADE IT CLEAR TO ME--BEING A GOOD CHRISTIAN AIN'T ABOUT DOING GOOD IN THE WORLD.
IT'S ABOUT *CONTROL.*
THINK ABOUT IT. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS DON'T HELP NOBODY.
TWO ARE TOTAL THROWAWAYS. HONOR THY PARENTS? THAT'S BULL. SOME PEOPLE HAVE @#$% ONES.
AND THEN REMEMBER THE SABBATH? I MEAN, COME ON--WHAT EVEN IS A SABBATH?
THE REST ARE ALL ABOUT ABSTINENCE.
THOU SHALT *NOT.*


GIVE ME A @#$% BREAK. YOU CAN FOLLOW ALL OF THEM TO A T--AND STILL NOT HELP A SOUL.
I WANT IT ALL. AND I'M HELPING MY FAMILY ALONG THE WAY.

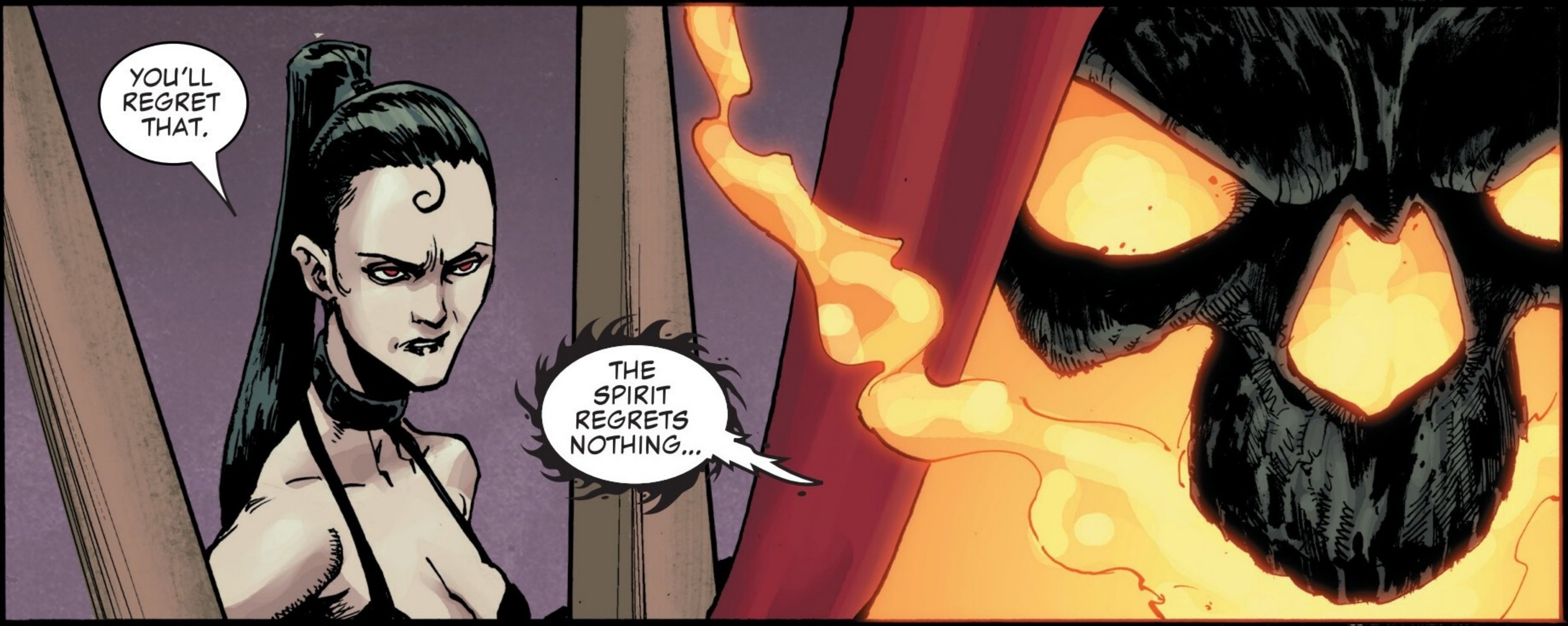

IF YOU SIN, YOU CAN STILL HELP OTHERS BETTER THAN ANY "GOOD" CHRISTIAN COULD...
...WHILE ENJOYING THE HELL OUT OF YOURSELF.

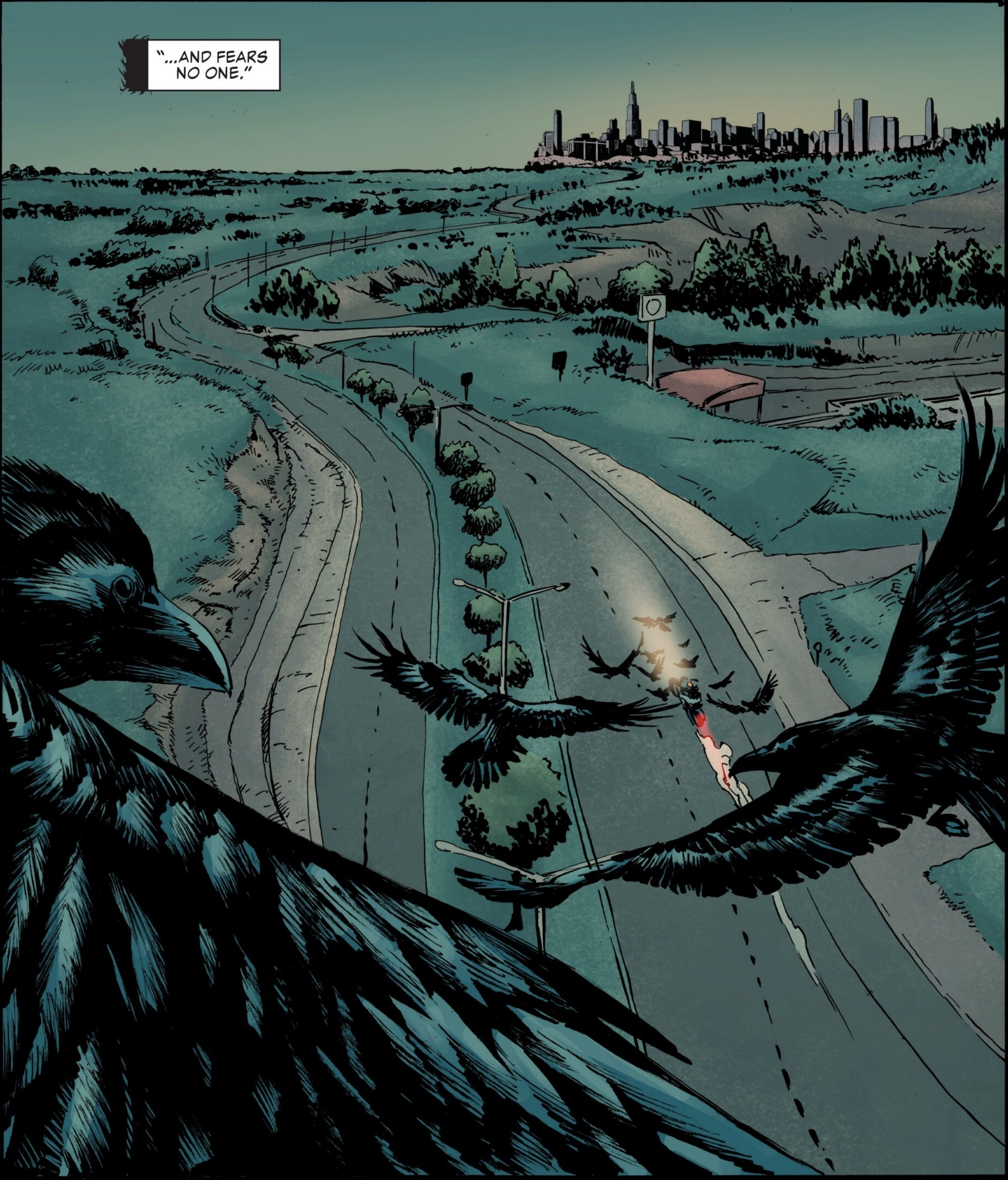

WHAT THE @#$% IS THIS?


HASSSSS...
ARE YOU @#&% KIDDING ME?!
EVER HEARD OF THE EXPRESSION--DON'T BITE THE @#$%& HAND THAT FEEDS YOU?!

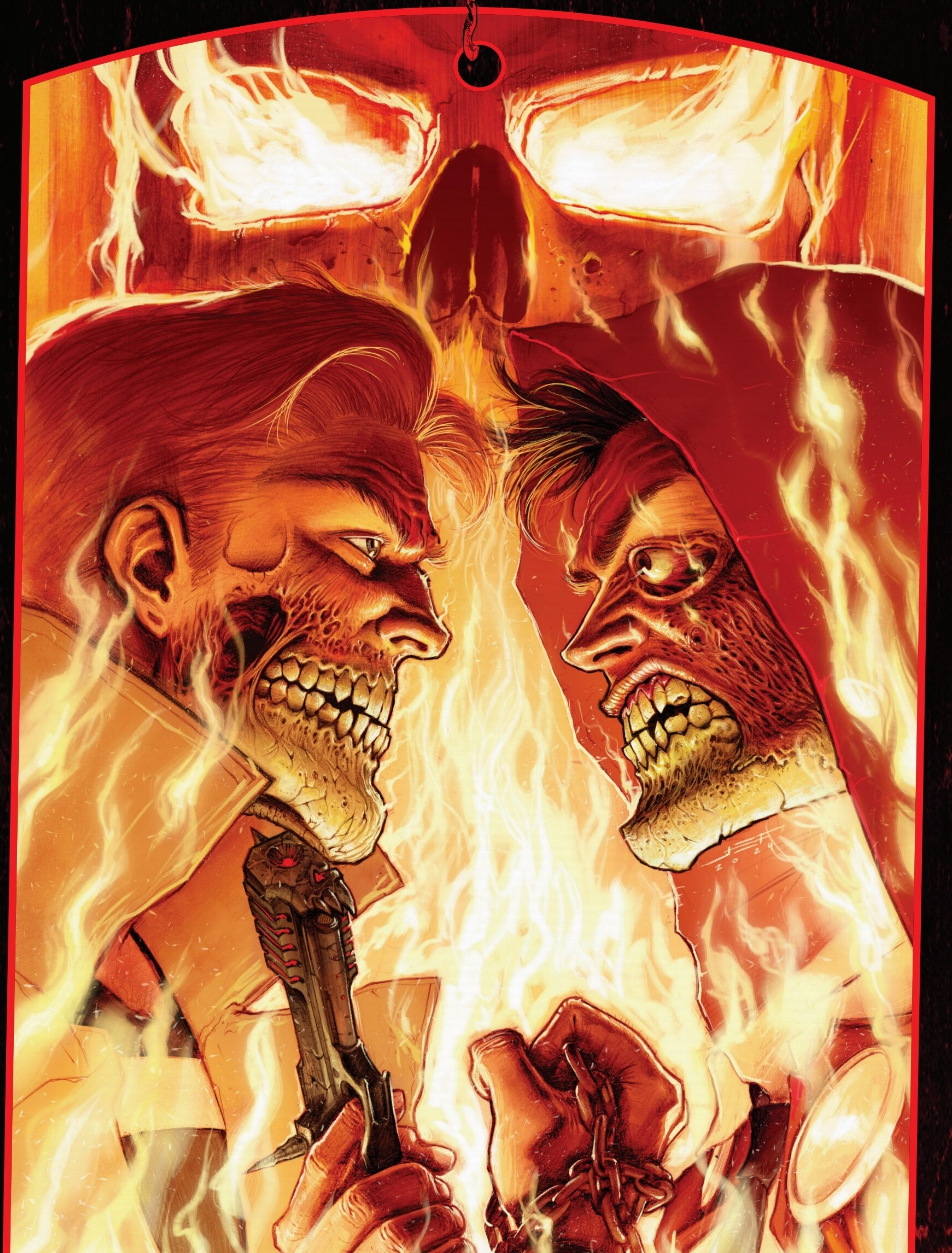
I'M PLENTY ENOUGH ON MY OWN--THAT'S WHAT MY EX-WIFE SAID WHEN SHE LEFT ME.
BUT THERE'S MORE TO ME NOW.
A TWONESS.
TWO BIG DOGS WARRING OVER THE SAME BODY.
HOPEFULLY, I DON'T GET TORN APART.

STOP!!!
LEAVE MY CHILDREN BE!
THEY DARED TO DRINK FROM MY PRISONERS, HELLMUTH.
I NEED THESE CRIME BOSSES ALIVE. THEY HAVE YEARS OF EXPERIENCE I NEED TO DRAW FROM.
FOOOOOM
YOUR CHILDREN...
...MUST BE PUNISHED.
TSSSSSSS


YOU'LL REGRET THAT.
THE SPIRIT REGRETS NOTHING...


"...AND FEARS NO ONE."

NUMBER FIVE



"Chain Gang"

CHICAGO.
PARKER.
esh Meat
THINGS ARE GETTING PRETTY QUIET AROUND HERE.
HELMUTH AND HER VAMPIRES HAVE CLEARED OUT.
WE HAD, LET'S SAY, A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.
I TORCHED A FEW OF THEIR ASSES, AND THEY SCURRIED FOR THE DOOR, THEIR PANTS FULL OF GRAVE DIRT.
BUT THAT'S OKAY. THERE'S NOT A LOT OF BLOOD LEFT TO BE SPILLED IN THIS CITY.

I GOT THE TRAINS.
I GOT THE SHIPYARDS.
I GOT THE GAMBLING.
I GOT THE LABOR UNIONS.
NOW I GOT ONE MORE BOSS TO TAKE DOWN...
...AND CHICAGO--THE COMMERCIAL HEART OF THE COUNTRY--IS MINE.
IF THAT AIN'T THE BIG TIME, I DON'T KNOW WHAT IS.

CHICAGO.
JOHNNY.
FROM THE MOMENT I ROLL INTO THE CITY...
...I CAN'T SHAKE THE FEELING I'M BEING WATCHED.
IT'S *MEPHISTO.*
HIS SULFUR STINK IS IN THE AIR.
HE DOESN'T WANT ME WITHIN A THOUSAND MILES OF THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE.
AND I CAN FEEL THE STEEL JAWS AND THE GLASS FANGS OF THE CITY CLOSING AROUND ME.

DOOM DOOM DOOM
ZEB...
I SEE THEM, JOHNNY. BUT DON'T SWEAT IT...
...I GOT A CONTACT HERE WHO WILL TAKE CARE OF US.
HEY THERE, SISTER.
WHAT'S THE STORY WITH THE FACELESS NUN?
YOU MEET ALL SORTS OF FOLKS WHEN YOU'RE ON THE COUNCIL OF NIGHT MAGICIANS.
SHE AND I DID SOME BUSINESS A WHILE BACK, WHEN SHE USED TO BE A DEMON HUNTER AT THE VATICAN.
WE HAD A THING GOING FOR A TIME. REAL WILDCAT IN THE SACK, LET ME TELL YOU.

SHE MAINTAINED HER ARSENAL.
SILVER BULLETS...HOLY-WATER GRENADES... CRUCIFIX BLADES...
SHE'S GOT QUITE THE STASH.
YOU'D BE SURPRISED WHAT SHE'S COLLECTED OVER THE YEARS.
ARE YOU @#$%& SERIOUS?
MY OLD COSTUME?
SEE IF IT STILL FITS.
WE'RE HEADING INTO A HOLY WAR.
WE GOT TO LOOK OUR BEST.

BREANNE LOOKS SO PEACEFUL WHEN SHE SLEEPS.
GOD, I LOVE HER TO DEATH.
SHE WAS HAVING NIGHT TERRORS BEFORE...
...BUT EVER SINCE WE MOVED IN HERE... EVER SINCE SHE ENROLLED IN THE NEW SCHOOL, THEY'VE STOPPED.
THANK YOU, PARKER, FOR TAKING CARE OF US.
MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME, SARA.
MUCH AS I KNOW I DESERVED THE COLD SHOULDER YOU WERE GIVING ME...
...I'M @#$%& THRILLED YOU'RE FINALLY WARMING UP.

WHAT'S WRONG?
YOU TASTE FUNNY. LIKE... SOMETHING **BURNT.**
SO I NEED TO BRUSH MY TEETH? SO WHAT?
STOP IT. IT'S MORE THAN THAT.
WHEN I KISSED YOU...I HEARD **SCREAMING.**
LIKE... THOUSANDS OF VOICES. SCREAMING.
YOU'RE IMAGINING THINGS.
IT'S LATE, PARKER.
REASON I CAME OVER IS TO SAY TO LIE LOW. THINGS MIGHT GET A LITTLE HOT OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS.
BUT YOU AND ME, WE'RE GOING TO MAKE THIS WORK.
I'D KILL FOR YOU, SARA.

THE CHURCH HAD A SUB-FLOOR ENTRY TO THE TUNNEL SYSTEM RUNNING BELOW THE CITY.
WE STAY UNDERGROUND, AVOIDING WHAT EYES WE CAN.
WHATEVER RESIDUE THE SPIRIT LEFT IN ME, IT FEELS STRONGER NOW...
...MAYBE BECAUSE I'M CLOSER.
AND MAYBE BECAUSE I'M CLOSER...
...THE FORCES OF DARKNESS PRESSING BACK AGAINST ME ARE STRONGER TOO.
EEEEEEEE...
JOOOHNNNNEEEEEE!

MEPHISTO!
THAT AIN'T THE *REAL* HIM. IT'S A PILE OF VERMIN HE'S USING AS AN AVATAR.
TURRRRN AWAY...AND I WILLLL LET YOU LIVVVVE.
TURRRRN AWAY...
...OR I WILLLL OPEN THE GATESSSSS OF HELL...
...AND STOP YOU MYSSSSSELF.

THEN I GUESS I'LL SEE YOU REAL SOON.
PING
CHOOOM
SCREEEEEE
DOOOm
I DON'T NEED A COMPASS OR A MAP TO FIND MY WAY...
...I CAN *FEEL* ZARATHOS.

THIS IS IT.
MY FINAL FIGHT.
ALL THE ROADS AND TRAIN TRACKS AND FLIGHT PATHS AND SHIPPING ROUTES FLOW THROUGH CHICAGO LIKE SO MANY VEINS...
...MAKING IT AN IDEAL HUB FOR THE DRUG TRADE.
LORENZO PEREZ CONTROLS THE PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION.
UNTIL NOW.
ADIOS.
VRRRRMMMMM

SCREEEEE
BRAKAKA
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BRAKAKAKA
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLA
THEY'RE USED TO WINNING.
I LET THEM THINK THEY HAVE A CHANCE.

THEN I FIRE UP THE OLD *DAMNATION STARE.*
AND THEY REALIZE THEY DON'T DESERVE TO LIVE.
THEY SERVE AS THEIR OWN EXECUTIONERS.
BLAM BLAM BLAM
YOU WORK FOR ME NOW.
BEEN HEARING ABOUT YOU.
STEALING BUSINESS ALL OVER TOWN LIKE A LITTLE $#@&% WHO CAN'T MAKE HIS OWN WAY.
YOU THINK I'M GOING TO HAND OVER ALL MY HARD WORK TO A LOSER LIKE YOU?
WHAT ARE YOU DOING? PUT THAT GUN DOWN!
YOU CAN GO TO HELL.
KRAKAKA

THE WORDS BURN HOTTER THAN MY SKULL.
DA-DOOOM
"LOSER."
THAT @#$% CALLED ME A LOSER.
HE KILLED HIMSELF--AND DESTROYED HIS BUSINESS--RATHER THAN WORK FOR ME.
AND SARA, SHE SHOVED ME AWAY, BASICALLY SAYING SHE FOUND ME DISGUSTING.
WHERE'S MY @#$% RESPECT?

I NEED SOMEBODY TO UNDERSTAND ALL THAT I'VE @#$%& ACCOMPLISHED.
I NEED SOMEBODY TO @#$%& BELIEVE IN ME.
WOOOO
THE HELL IS THAT?
WOOO WOOO
MAMA ALWAYS SAID IF YOU BLOW ON A BOTTLE...
...YOU CALL THE GHOSTS TO YOU.
I REMEMBER YOU...
I SAVED YOU.
@#$% ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? YOU DIDN'T SAVE ME.
IN THAT BURNING BUILDING, YOU WERE--HEE HEE--SCREAMING AND CRYING LIKE A BABY.
YOU DIDN'T SAVE ME!
LIKE A BABY!
SHUT UP!
BLAM

MY THOUGHTS WON'T SIT STILL. MY NERVES FEEL SCORCHED. MY HEART'S BEATING SO HARD MY FINGERTIPS ARE PULSING.
EVERYTHING WAS GOING SO RIGHT, BUT NOW EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE GOING...
...WRONG.
You owe Us BLOOD
Helmuth
IF THE VAMPIRES DARED TO COLLECT THEIR DEBT HERE, THEN THERE'S NO REASON THEY WOULDN'T ALSO COME AFTER MY...

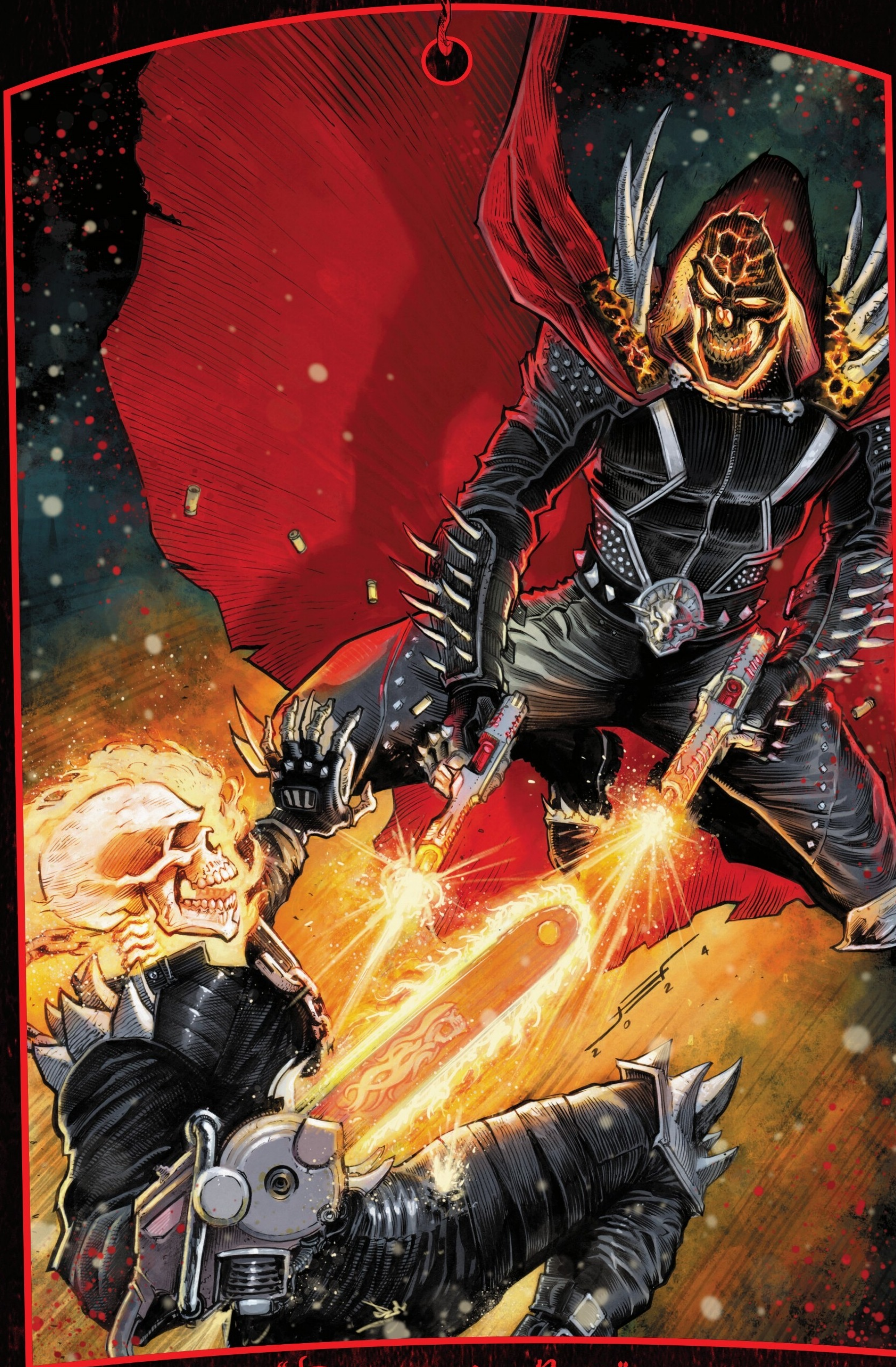
...FAMILY.
LATER. ACROSS TOWN.
SARA!
SARA?! BREANNE?!
PLEASE, GOD.
PLEASE LET THEM BE OKAY.
THERE'S NO GOD HERE.
SARA...?

THERE'S NO GOD HERE.
ONLY DEVILS.
OH NO.
NO, NO, NO.
CHICAGO WAS SUPPOSED TO BE MY NEW BEGINNING.
BUT IT'S TURNED INTO THE ULTIMATE DEAD END.
SOMETHING FLARES INSIDE ME THEN--A LAVA-HOT ANGER LIKE I'VE NEVER KNOWN.

A VOICE INSIDE ME--A VOICE THAT SOUNDS LIKE STONE SHIFTING--TELLS ME, "NO."
IT'S ZARATHOS.
IT'S THE SPIRIT HIMSELF.
BECAUSE HE KNOWS WHAT'S COMING NEXT.
I AIN'T LISTENING.
I'M GOING TO BURN THIS CITY TO THE GROUND...

...INNOCENTS AND ALL.
ZARATHOS!
YOU'VE GOT A CHOICE.
YOU'RE COMING WITH ME...
...OR YOU'RE GOING TO HELL.

NUMBER SIX



“End of the Road”

CHICAGO.
JOHNNY?
YEAH, ZEB?
IT'LL TAKE SOME TIME TO PREPARE THIS SPELL.
YOU GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT?
YOU GO ON AND DO YOUR THING, ZEB.
I'LL BE FINE.

I KNOW WHO'S UNDER THAT HOOD, PARKER ROBBINS.
YOU KNOW WHO I AM?
I KNOW WHO YOU ARE.
BLAM BLAM
BLAM BLAM
THEN YOU KNOW WHAT I'VE COME FOR.
I DON'T GIVE A @#$% ABOUT YOU...
THOOOM
...OR WHATEVER DEVIL'S BARGAIN YOU'VE MADE.
TANG

IT'S YOUR VOICE I'M HEARING, PARKER.
NOT THE SPIRIT'S.
I HAVEN'T HAD CONTROL LIKE THAT IN A LONG TIME.
EVERY DAY, MY BODY WAS TORN IN TWO DIRECTIONS.
WHEN ZARATHOS TOOK OVER, I GOT LOST IN THE FIRE.
WHAT DID YOU OFFER?
I GAVE THE SPIRIT WHAT YOU NEVER WOULD.

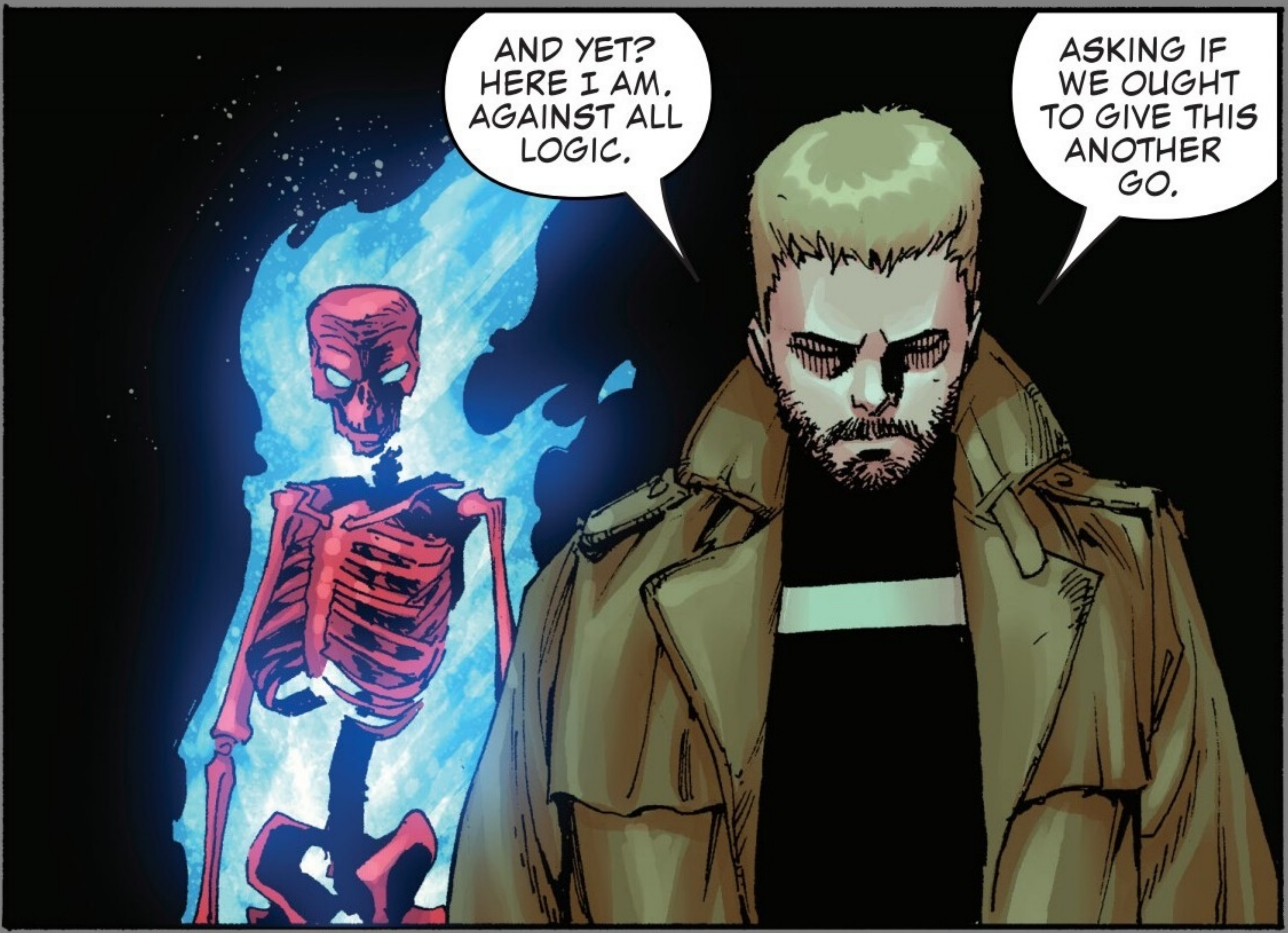
BLAM
ENOUGH BLOOD TO FILL LAKE MICHIGAN!
ENOUGH PAIN AND PUNISHMENT TO CHOKE THE DEEPEST PITS OF HELL.
THOOOM
LET ME SHOW YOU WHAT I'VE LEARNED, JOHNNY.
I'LL SHOW YOUR OUTSIDE WHAT YOUR INSIDE LOOKS LIKE.
I'LL TEACH YOU HOW TO SCREAM AND BABBLE LIKE A BABY DROPPED IN A BOILING POT OF WATER.
I'LL MAKE YOU WISH YOU WERE *DEAD*.

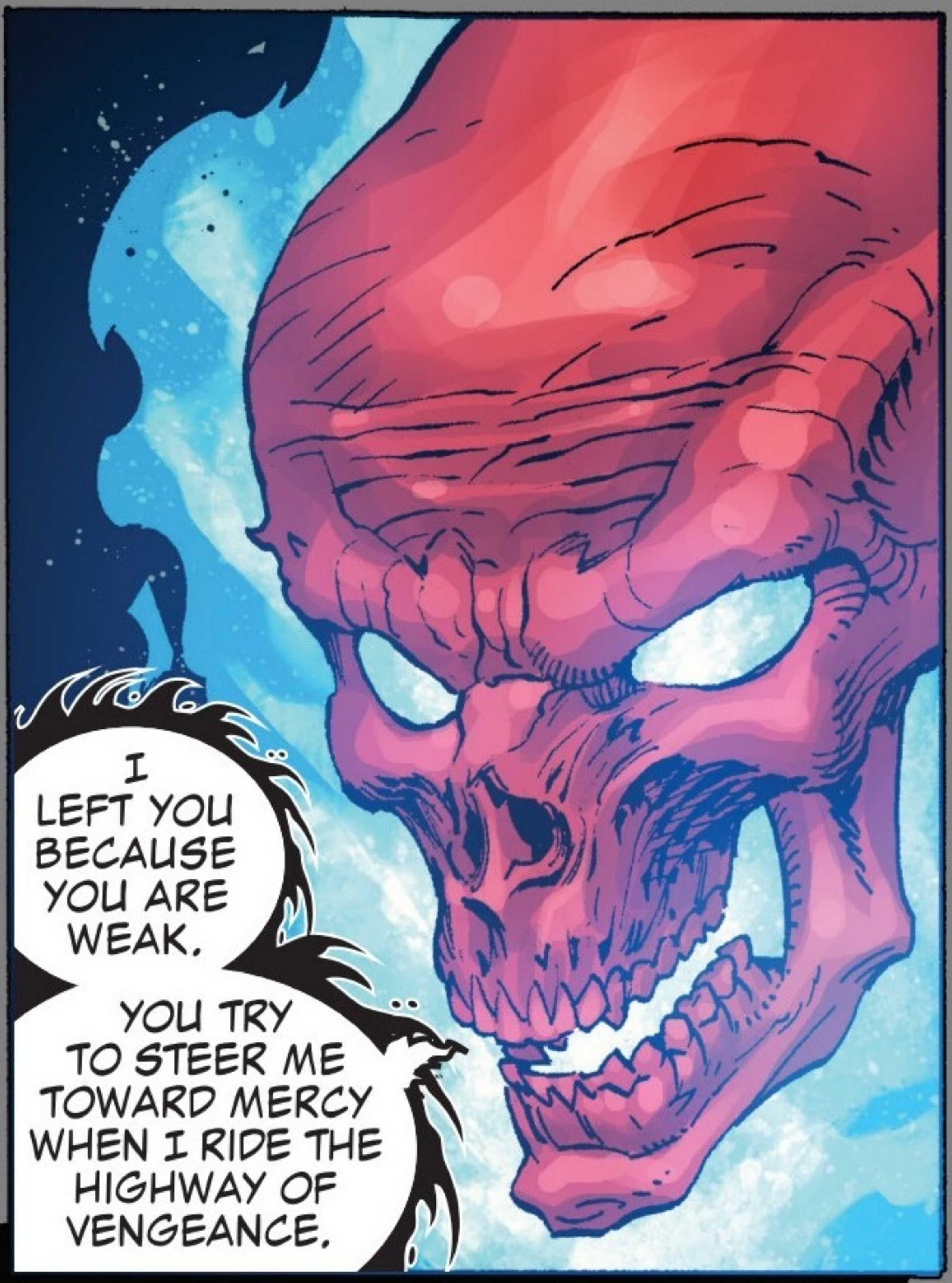
AND AFTER I TEAR YOUR BODY APART, YOUR SOUL WILL FOLLOW.
BUT FIRST, THE SUFFERING.
THE BEAUTIFUL @#$%& SUFFERING.

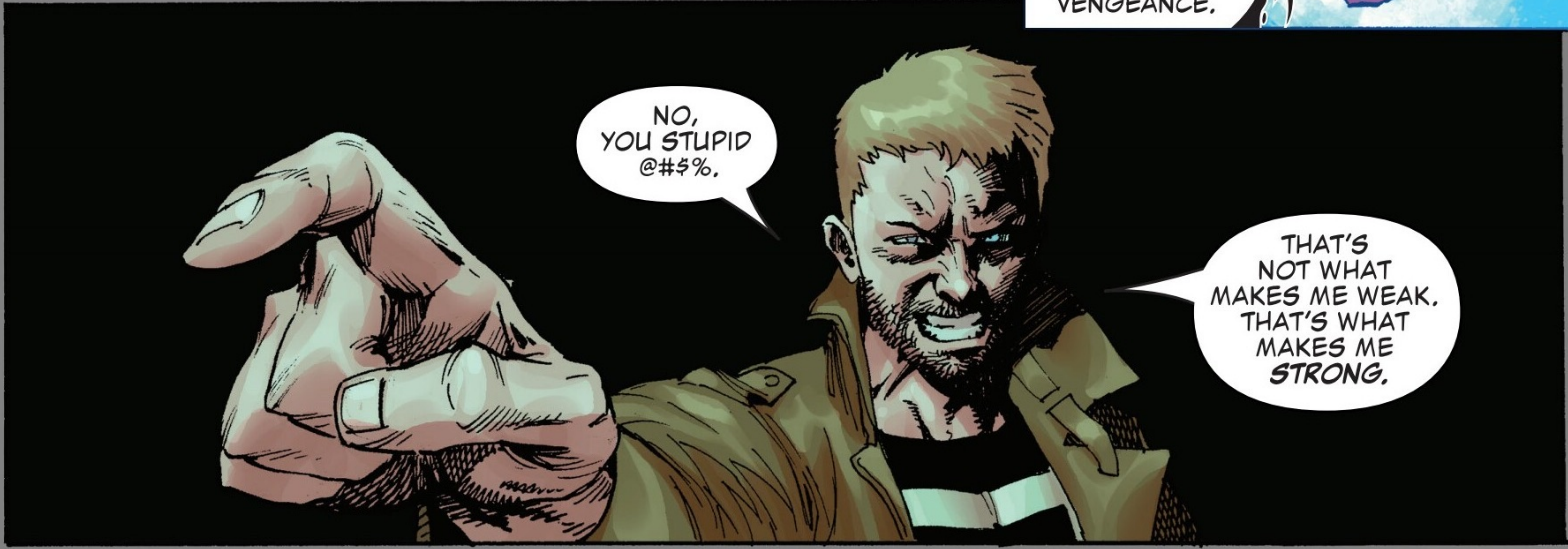
KAK KAK
THERE WAS A SPELL...
...A SEVERANCE SPELL.
KAK
KAK KAW
KAK KAW
ZEB HAD NEVER ATTEMPTED IT.
KAW KAW
THERE WAS NO CERTAINTY IT WOULD WORK.
KAW KAW
BUT IT WAS MY BEST SHOT AT APPEALING DIRECTLY TO...

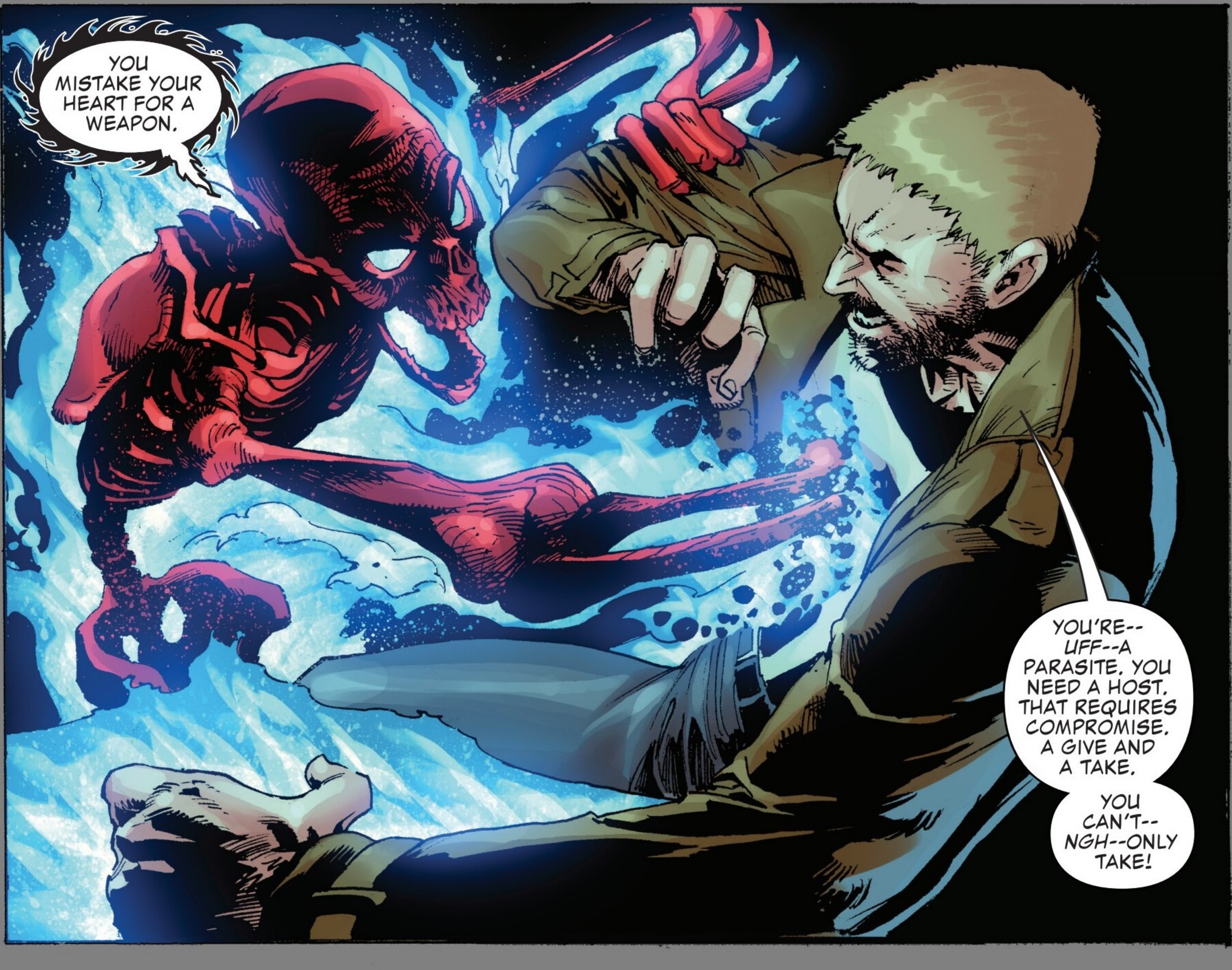
...ZARATHOS.
YOU LEFT WITHOUT SAYING GOODBYE.
WHAT IS THIS PRISON? WHERE ARE WE?
WE'RE NOWHERE.
AND WE'RE NOTHING.
JUST TWO SOULS HAVING A CONVERSATION.
THERE IS NOTHING TO SAY. OUR TIME TOGETHER IS OVER.
MAYBE. BUT I THINK YOU'D BETTER HEAR ME OUT FIRST.
FOR STARTERS, YOU'RE THE WORST @#$%& THING THAT'S EVER HAPPENED TO ME.

ALL THE PAIN-- EVERY BAD THING THAT'S HAPPENED TO ME OVER THE YEARS, LEADING ALL THE WAY BACK TO CRASH'S DEATH--IS CONNECTED TO *YOU.*
I HATE WHAT YOU'VE MADE ME SURVIVE.
I HATE WHAT YOU'VE MADE ME DO.
YOU'VE MADE MY LIFE THE DEFINITION OF A *LIVING HELL.*
ROXANE BLAZE


AND YET? HERE I AM. AGAINST ALL LOGIC.
ASKING IF WE OUGHT TO GIVE THIS ANOTHER GO.


I LEFT YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE WEAK.
YOU TRY TO STEER ME TOWARD MERCY WHEN I RIDE THE HIGHWAY OF VENGEANCE.


NO, YOU STUPID @#$%.
THAT'S NOT WHAT MAKES ME WEAK. THAT'S WHAT MAKES ME *STRONG.*


YOU MISTAKE YOUR HEART FOR A WEAPON.
YOU'RE--UFF--A PARASITE. YOU NEED A HOST. THAT REQUIRES COMPROMISE. A GIVE AND A TAKE.
YOU CAN'T--NGH--ONLY TAKE!

TSS SS
SSSSS
SSS
SSSSSS
PUNG
INFURMUM.

A PLAGUE UPON YOUR CROWS.
JOHNNY BLAZE...
...YOU WHINE AND YOU WEEP.
YOU INSULT MEPHISTO.
UFF!
I GAVE YOU A GIFT...
...AND YOU CALL IT A CURSE.
YOU'VE BEEN DRIVING DANGEROUSLY FOR FAR TOO LONG.
IT'S TIME FOR THE BLACKTOP TO CLAIM YOU.

PARKER...
COME TO US, PARKER.
COME TO YOUR WIFE AND DAUGHTER.
SARA... BREANNE... I DON'T...
I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO.
DO WHAT YOU PROMISED ME.
PUNISH THEM. KILL THEM.
REAP.

I CAN'T.
TCK
I JUST CAN'T.
YOU'RE RATHER PATHETIC-- AREN'T YOU, ROBBINS?
YOU PROMISED ME BLOOD, SO I GRANTED YOU POWER.
MEPHISTO. PLEASE. YOU CAN HELP THEM, CAN'T YOU?
IF YOU ARE TO BEG, BEG PROPERLY...
...AT MY FEET.
MAKE THEM HUMAN AGAIN! FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!
THERE IS NO GOD HERE. YOU KNOW THAT.
THEY DON'T DESERVE THIS.

IF THERE'S A PRICE, I'LL PAY IT. I'LL DO ANYTHING. I DON'T WANT ANY OF THIS. NOT ANYMORE.
HERE. MY HOOD.
IT'S YOURS!
I'LL GIVE YOU WHATEVER YOU WANT.
YOU KNOW WHAT I WANT.
YOU CAN HAVE IT, THEN.
YOU CAN HAVE... *ME.*
P-PARKER? WHAT HAPPENED? WHAT'S GOING ON?
MY SOUL--IT'S YOURS.

SARA! BREANNE!
I ALWAYS TOLD YOU I'D TAKE CARE OF YOU, DIDN'T I?
YOU'RE MINE NOW, REMEMBER?
YOU FAILED ME, AND YOU FAILED YOURSELF.
I WANT TO MAKE SURE YOU NEVER FORGET THAT.
AIIIEE!
SKELCH

MEPHISTO!
DO YOU SEE?
THE SPIRIT'S NOT DONE WITH ME!
AND NEITHER ARE YOU.
NO...
NO, I SUPPOSE I'M NOT, AS MUCH AS I WOULD LIKE TO BE.
SOME OF ZARATHOS REMAINS WITH YOU...
...AND I SENSE A RESIDUE OF *YOU* IN ZARATHOS.

SO WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US?
AT A CROSSROADS...
...WHERE THE DEVIL MAKES HIS DEALS.
YOU WANT A NEW CONTRACT?
YOU BELONG TO EACH OTHER, BUT YOU *WORK FOR ME.*

PEOPLE THINK OF HEAVEN AND HELL AS COMMUNITIES, A PLACE WHERE YOU JOIN A GATHERING OF SOULS.
BUT THE TRUTH OF DAMNATION IS THE TRUTH OF LIFE.
YOU CREATE YOUR OWN PRIVATE HELL.
WW-KSH
PARKER ROBBINS WANTED THE BIG TIME.
HE PAID HIS WAY IN VENGEANCE. HE PAINTED THE STREETS OF CHICAGO IN BLOOD. HE SAT ON A THRONE OF HOT CHAINS.
BUT HE WASN'T AS RUTHLESS AS HE PRETENDED TO BE. HE GAVE IT ALL UP SO THAT HIS FAMILY COULD LIVE.
GREED MIGHT HAVE POISONED HIM.
BUT IN THE END, IT WAS *LOVE* THAT DAMNED HIM.

NOBODY'S ONE THING. NOT GOOD, NOT EVIL.
ZEB'S ALWAYS TALKING ABOUT MAINTAINING THE BALANCE OF LIGHT AND DARK.
FOR ME, I'VE DISCOVERED THERE'S NO OTHER WAY.
I CAN SAVE INNOCENT LIVES EVEN AS I DEAL OUT TERRIBLE VENGEANCE.
I'M JOHNNY BLAZE, AND I'M ZARATHOS.
EACH OF US IS HOLLOW AND DISTORTED WITHOUT THE OTHER.

BUT TOGETHER, WE'RE THE *GHOST RIDER*...
...AND IT'S OUR FATE TO DO A LITTLE BIT OF GOOD WHILE DOING A WHOLE LOT OF BAD...
...AS WE BRING A PUNISHING FIRE TO THIS BLACKTOP WASTELAND.
THE END.

I'm a horror head. I grew up on Stephen King, John Carpenter, *Fangoria* magazine and comics like TOMB OF DRACULA, WEREWOLF BY NIGHT, MOON KNIGHT, MAN-THING and GHOST RIDER. I started writing for Marvel in 2017, and I immediately made a play for Johnny Blaze. Over email. On the phone. At the bar. On the convention floor. Many editors heard me darkly whispering my pitch. I wanted to go hard on the series. Make it a true horror title. Scare and disturb the audience. No holds barred. Push the gore right up to the edge of the ratings cliff. I wanted everybody to look up from the last page and say, "What in the living hell did I just read?"

Johnny Blaze has something in common with the werewolf, with Jekyll and Hyde, with the Hulk. He is a twinned self. The other side of that cursed coin is the Spirit of Vengeance, a monster he hosts in a poisonous, parasitic relationship. That's something everyone can relate to. You're exhausted. You're broke. You're driven to rage or grief. You're drunk. Whatever. You're on the edge, and you lose control. Johnny's an empathetic monster in that way. He's a good guy, and he's a bad guy. He does terrible things, yes, but you can empathize with his transgressions, because he's overcome by something uncanny and sexy and terrible and wonderful. And he's desperately trying to control that Hellish font of energy inside him and do some good with it...even as he torches faces and tears people apart with chains.

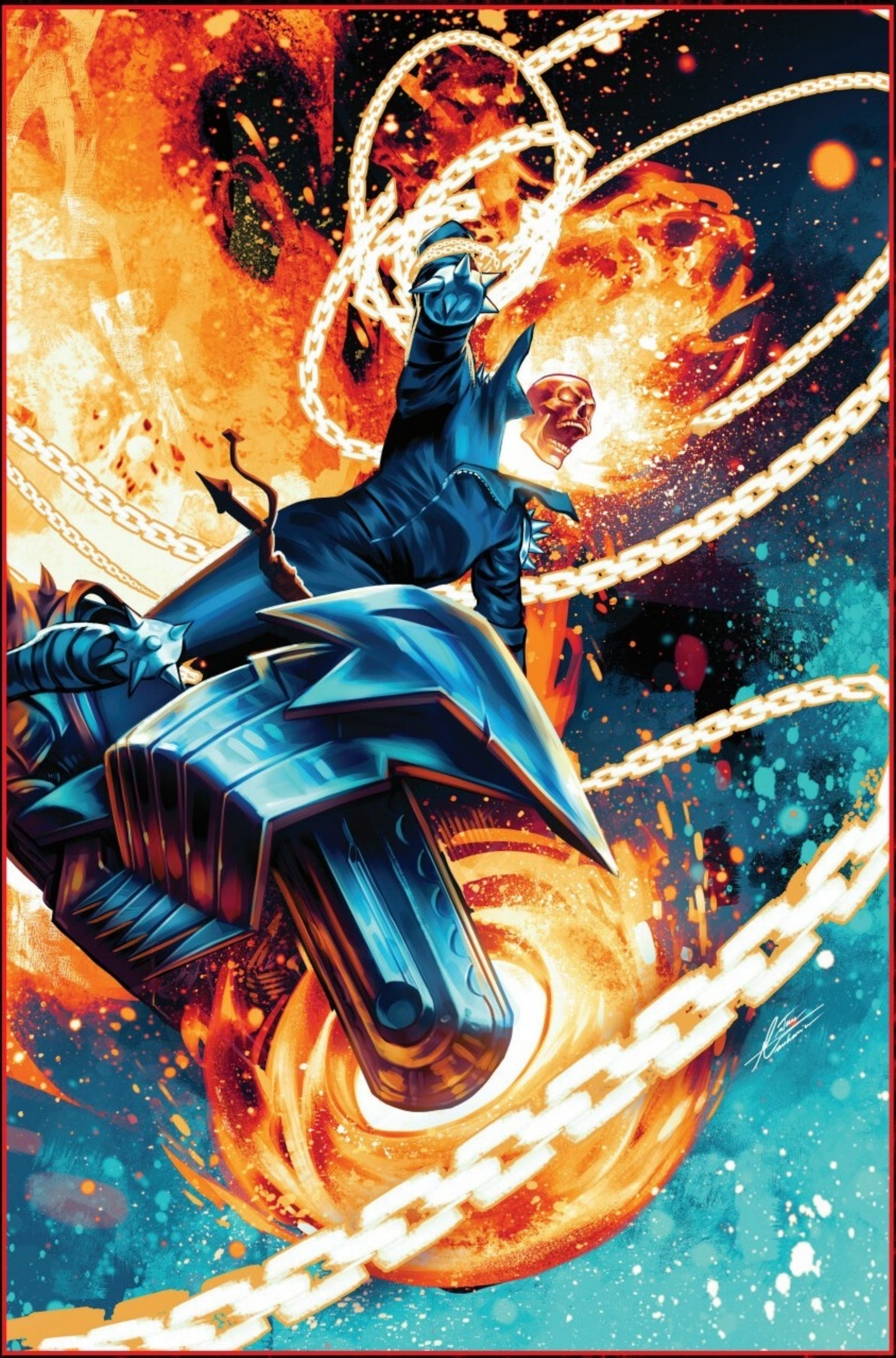
When Marvel finally said yes, the timing was perfect. The 50th Anniversary of the character. There's a rich, complicated mythology surrounding the series, but C.B. Cebulski and Darren Shan told me they wanted a back-to-basics approach for this landmark moment. That suited me perfectly. In this new beginning, Blaze was a kind of John Rambo in *First Blood* or Man with No Name from the Clint Eastwood westerns. A haunted drifter who's trying to find his way and can't escape his capacity for violence.

Ghost Rider is the coolest design in comics. No argument there. It's just a fact. And you cannot look at the flaming skull, the chains, the leather jacket, the motorcycle--and not hear Metallica or AC/DC. Cory Smith is a heavy-metal kind of artist, and I was so damn lucky to kick off this series with him. He set the tone with gritty alleyways, filthy bars, shadow-soaked motels, rusted gas stations.

But a character is only so interesting on his own. It's relationships that people truly connect with and give a damn about. So maybe my proudest addition to the Ghost Rider library is Talia Warroad. Like Johnny, she's dark and damaged and ravaged by guilt, and their nightmarish chemistry is the flaming heart at the center of this road horror epic.

I'm grateful that Marvel let me go wild with this series, just as I'm grateful to all the talented artists I've collaborated with along the way and, of course, Darren Shan, Kat Gregorowicz and Noah Sharma for their editorial guidance.

See you on the midnight highways,
Benjamin Percy



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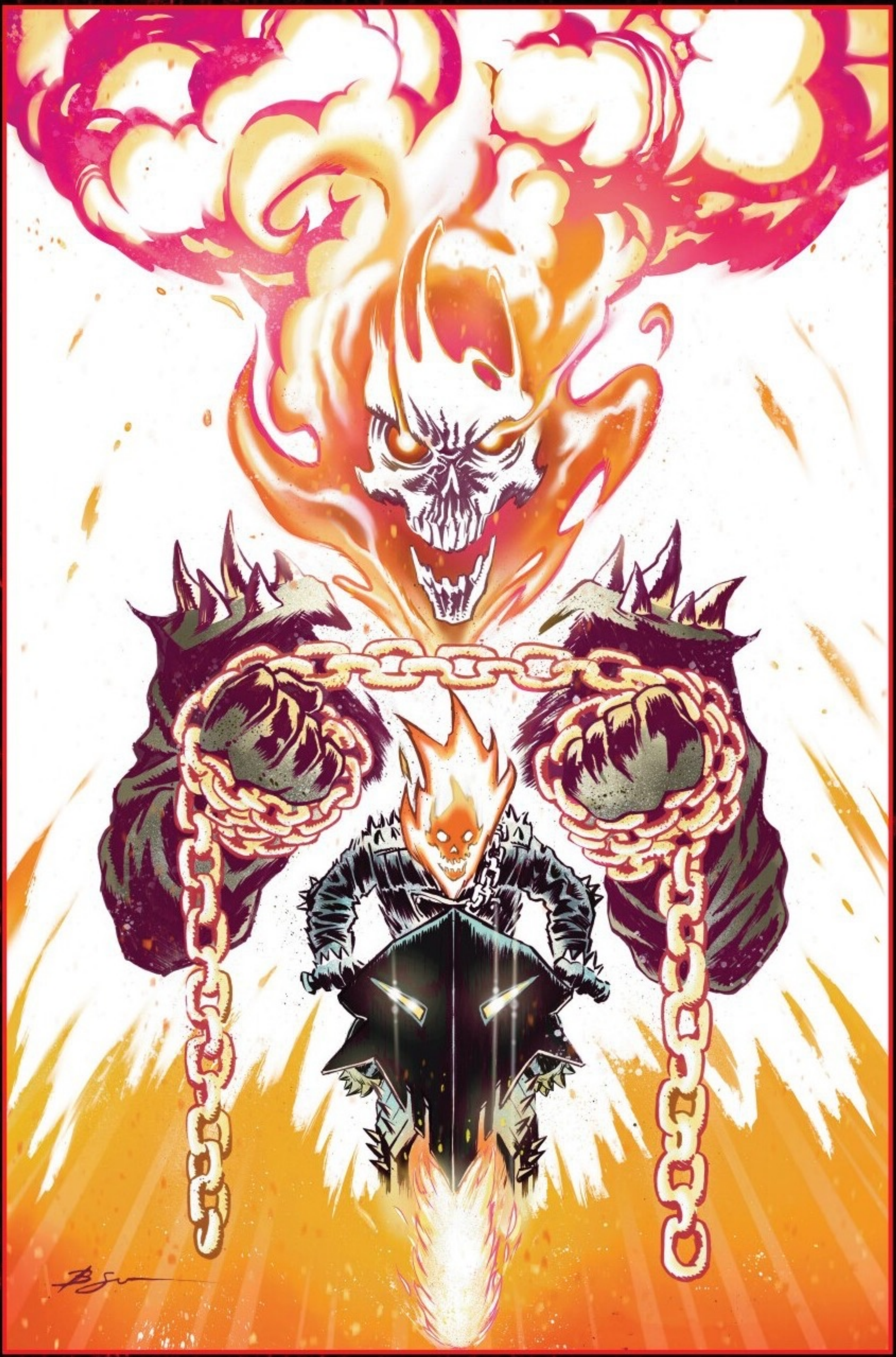

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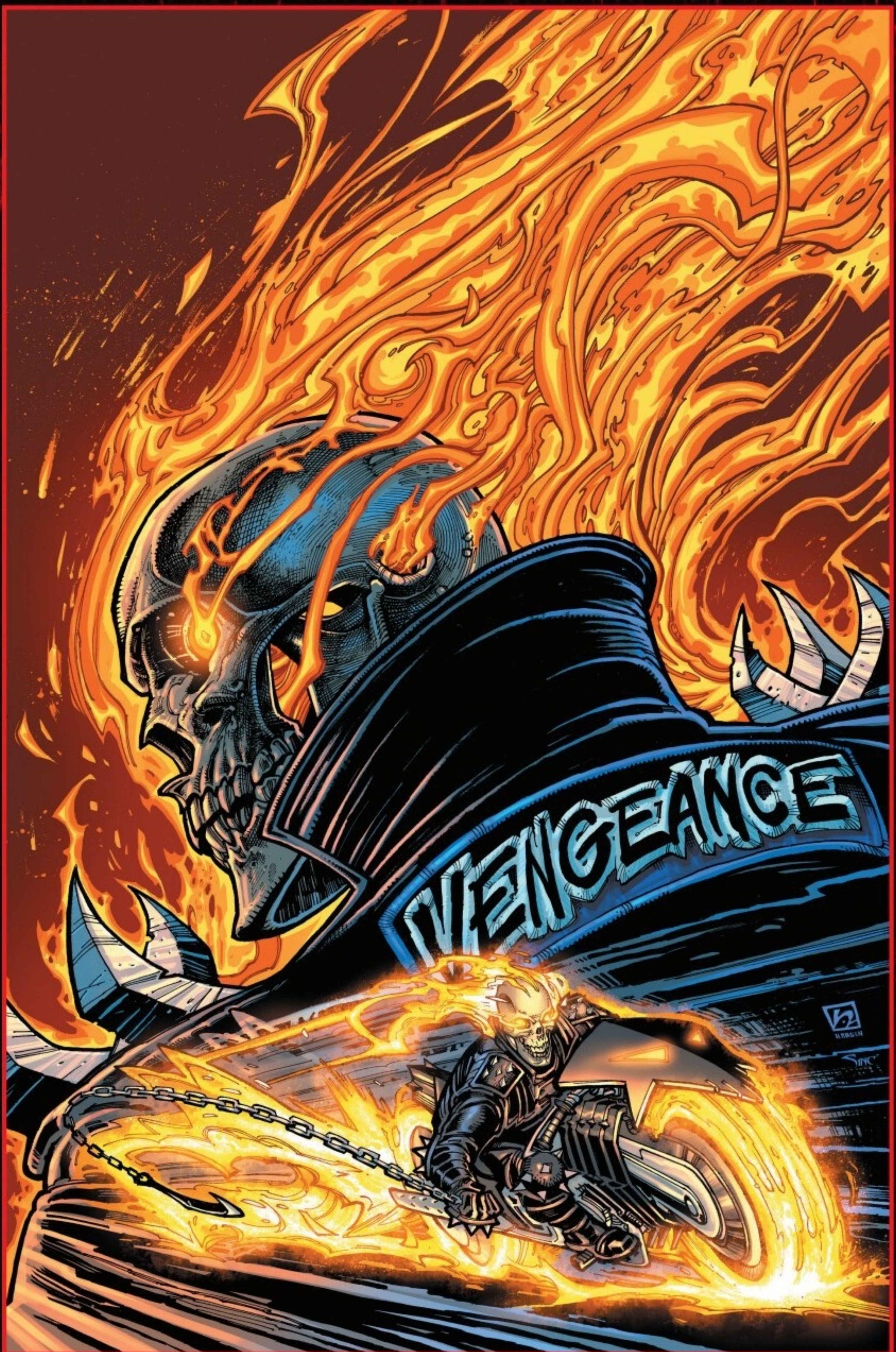

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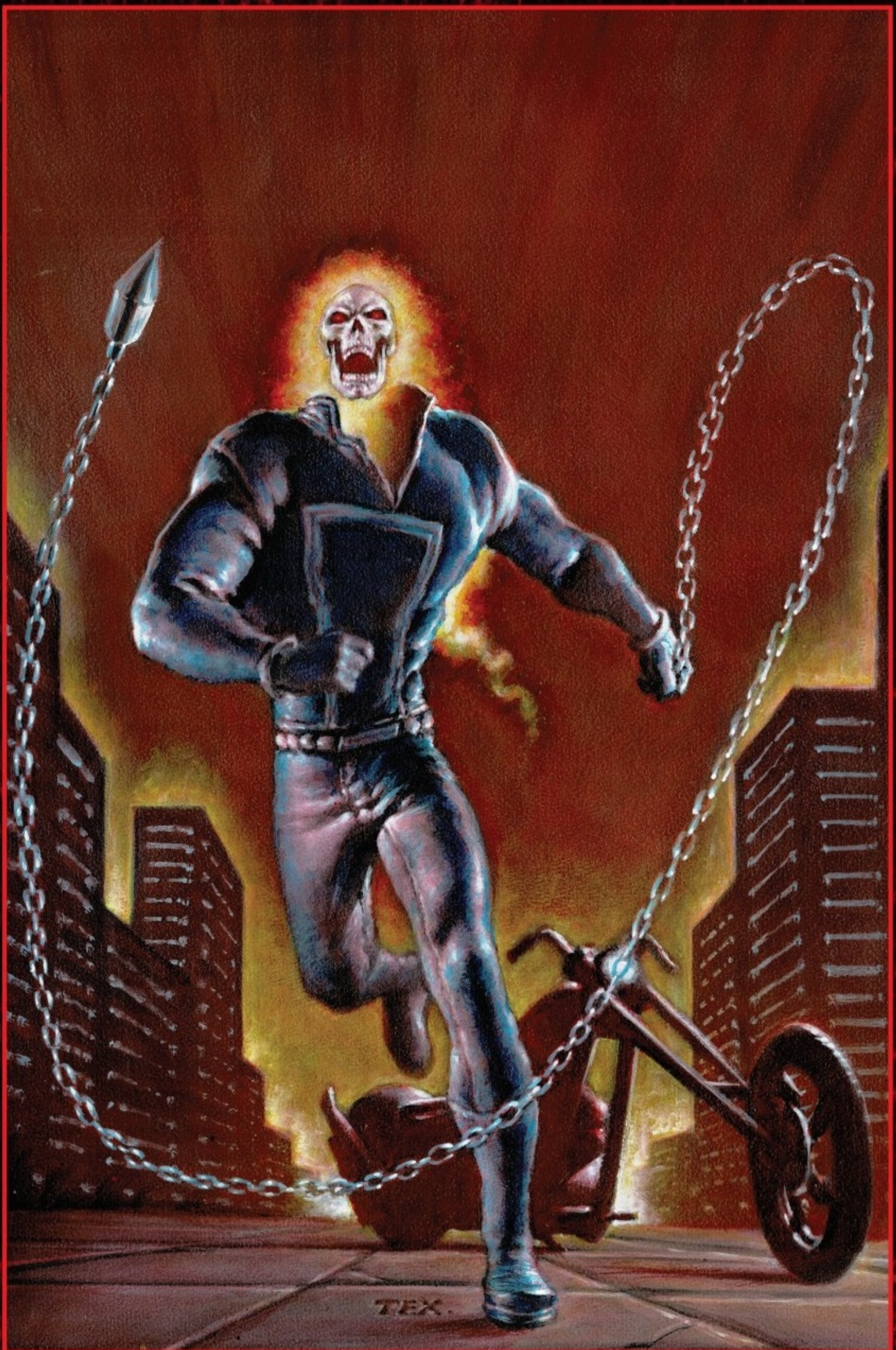

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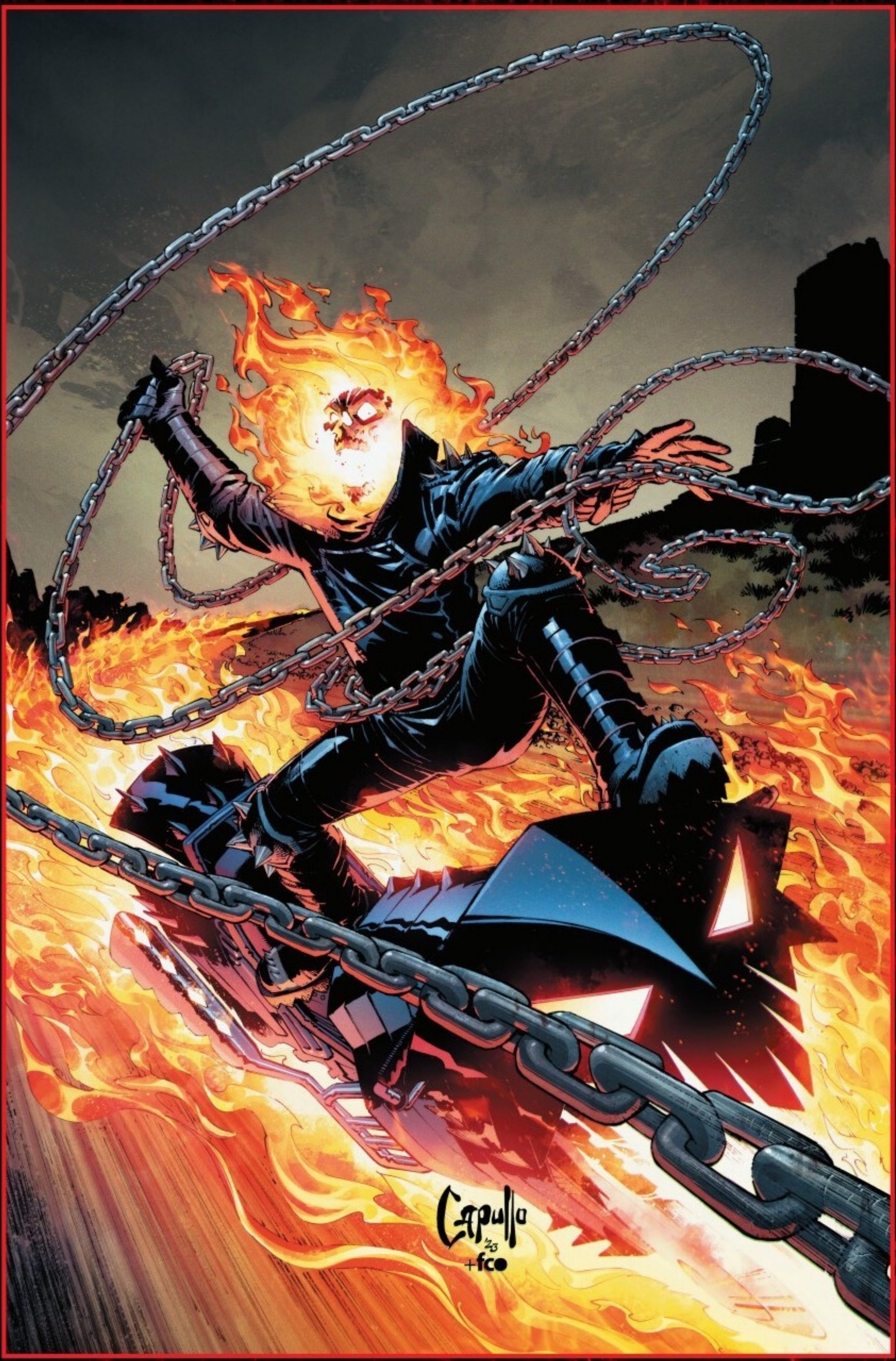
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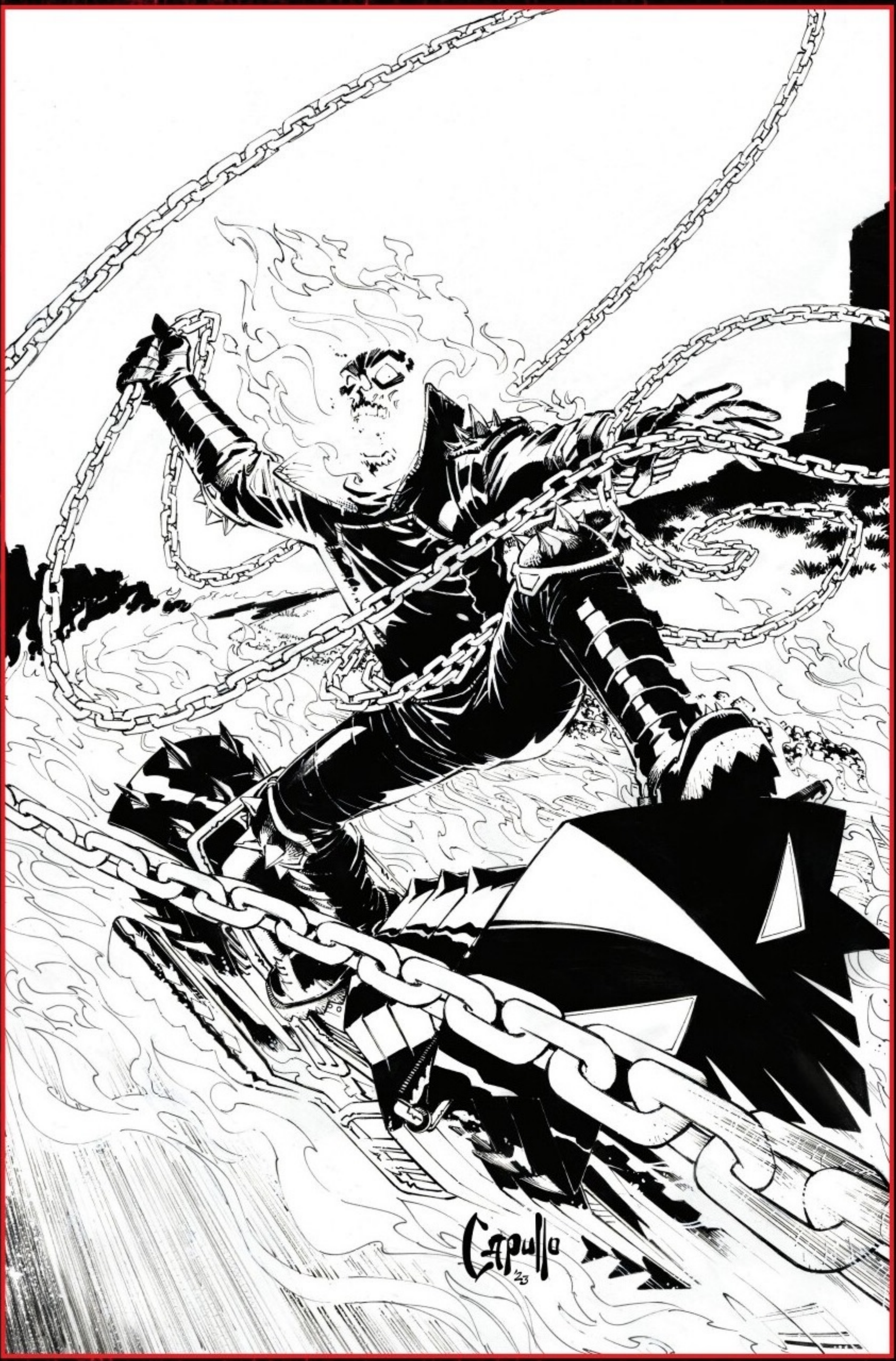

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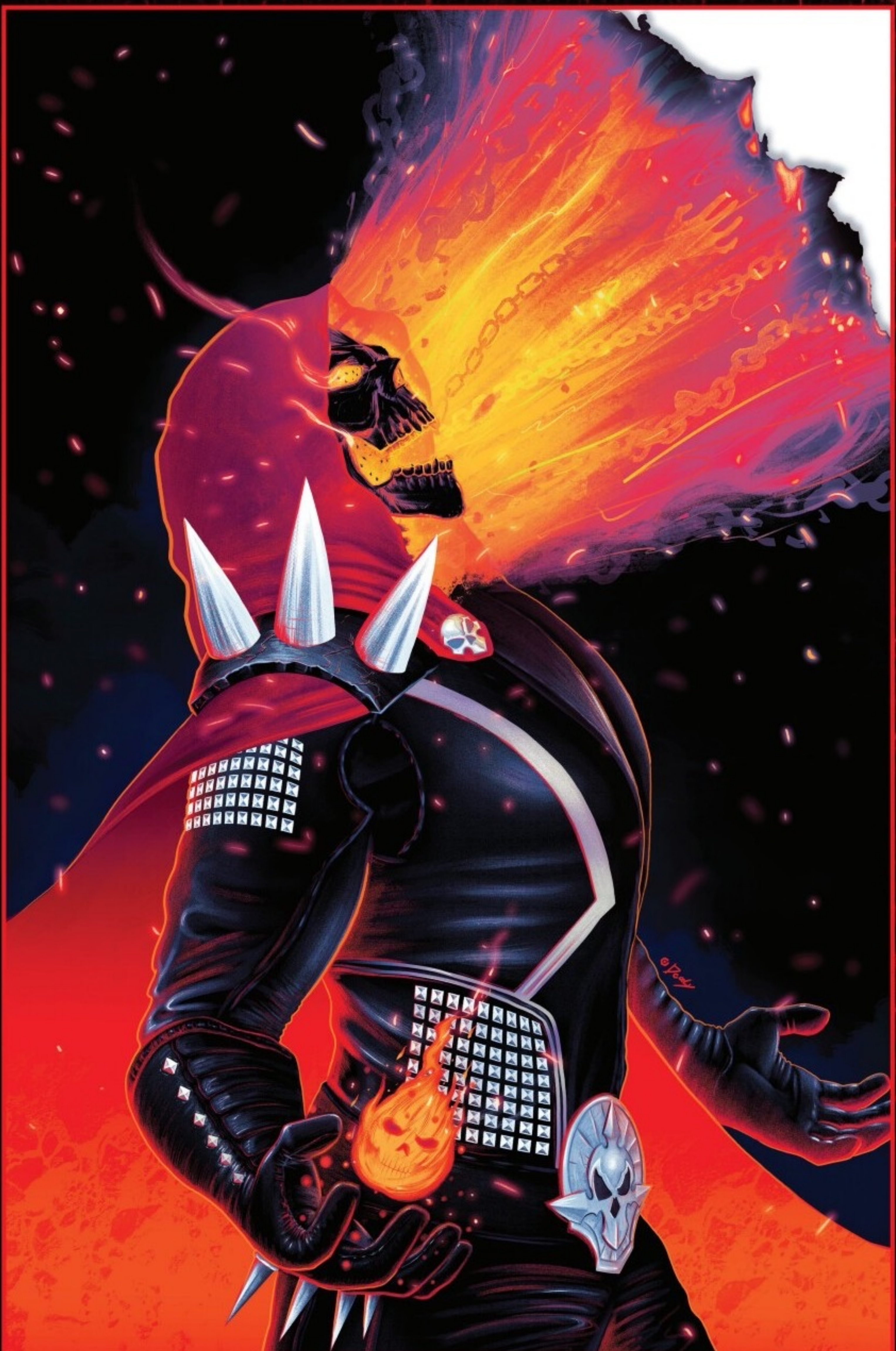

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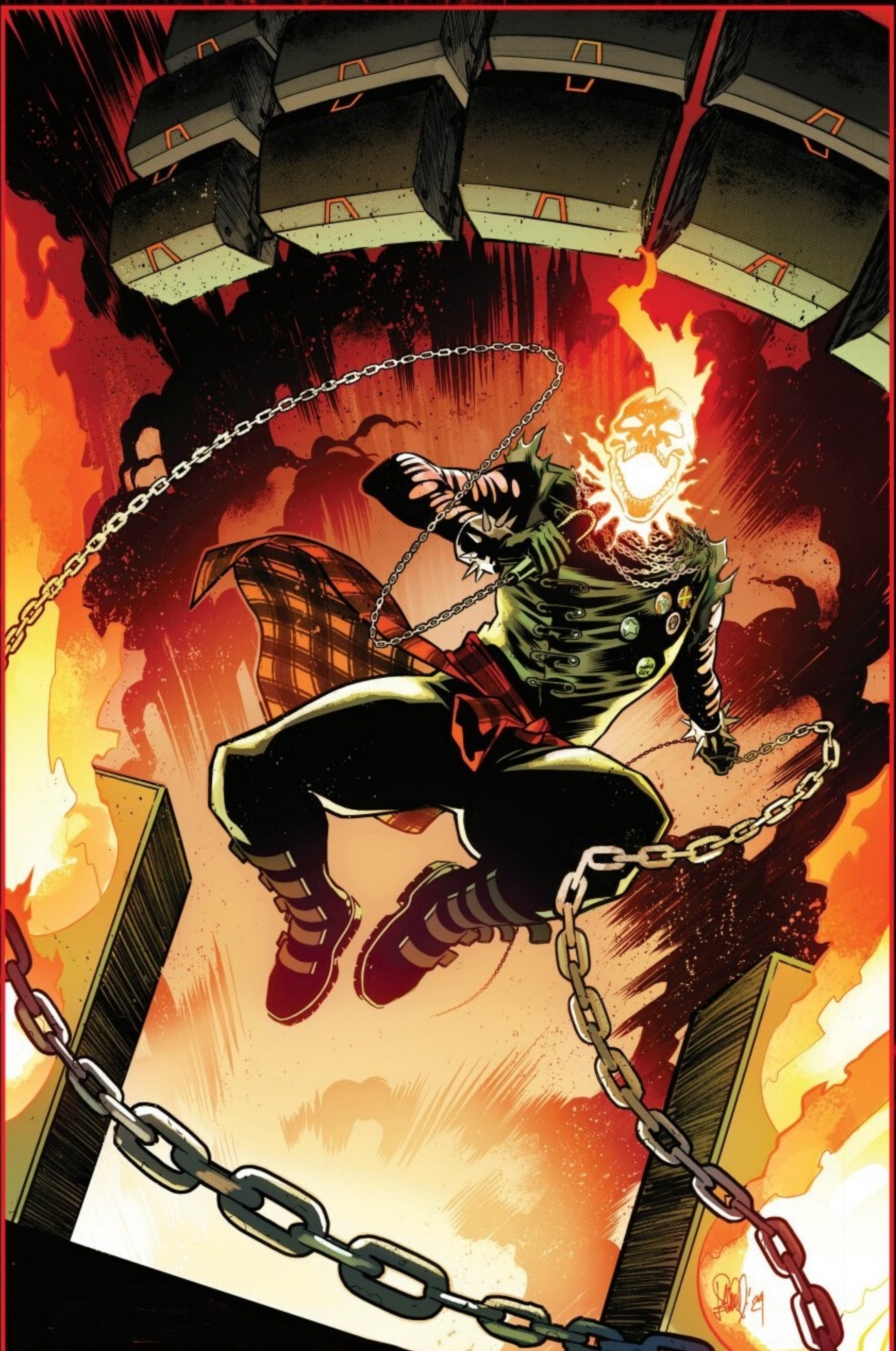

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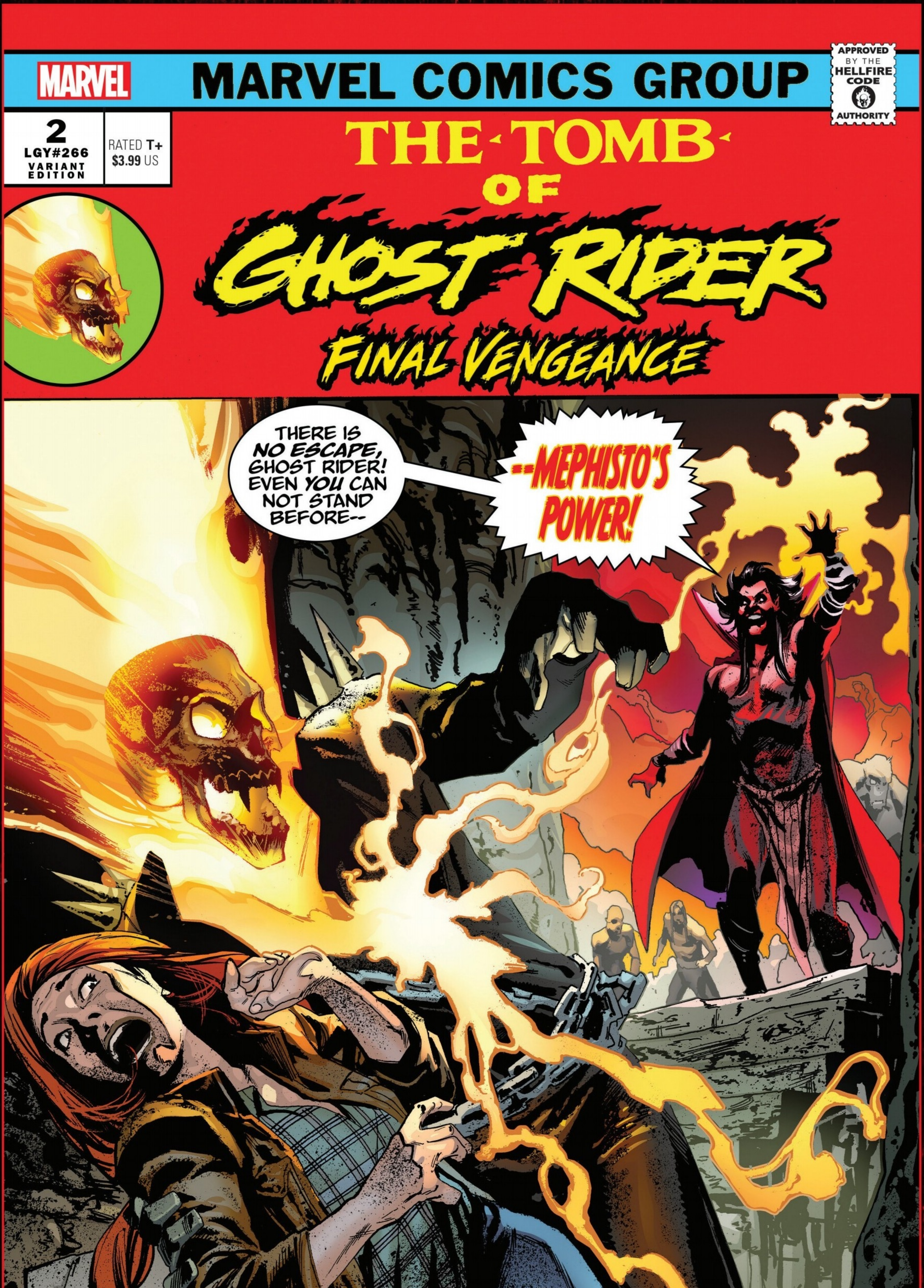
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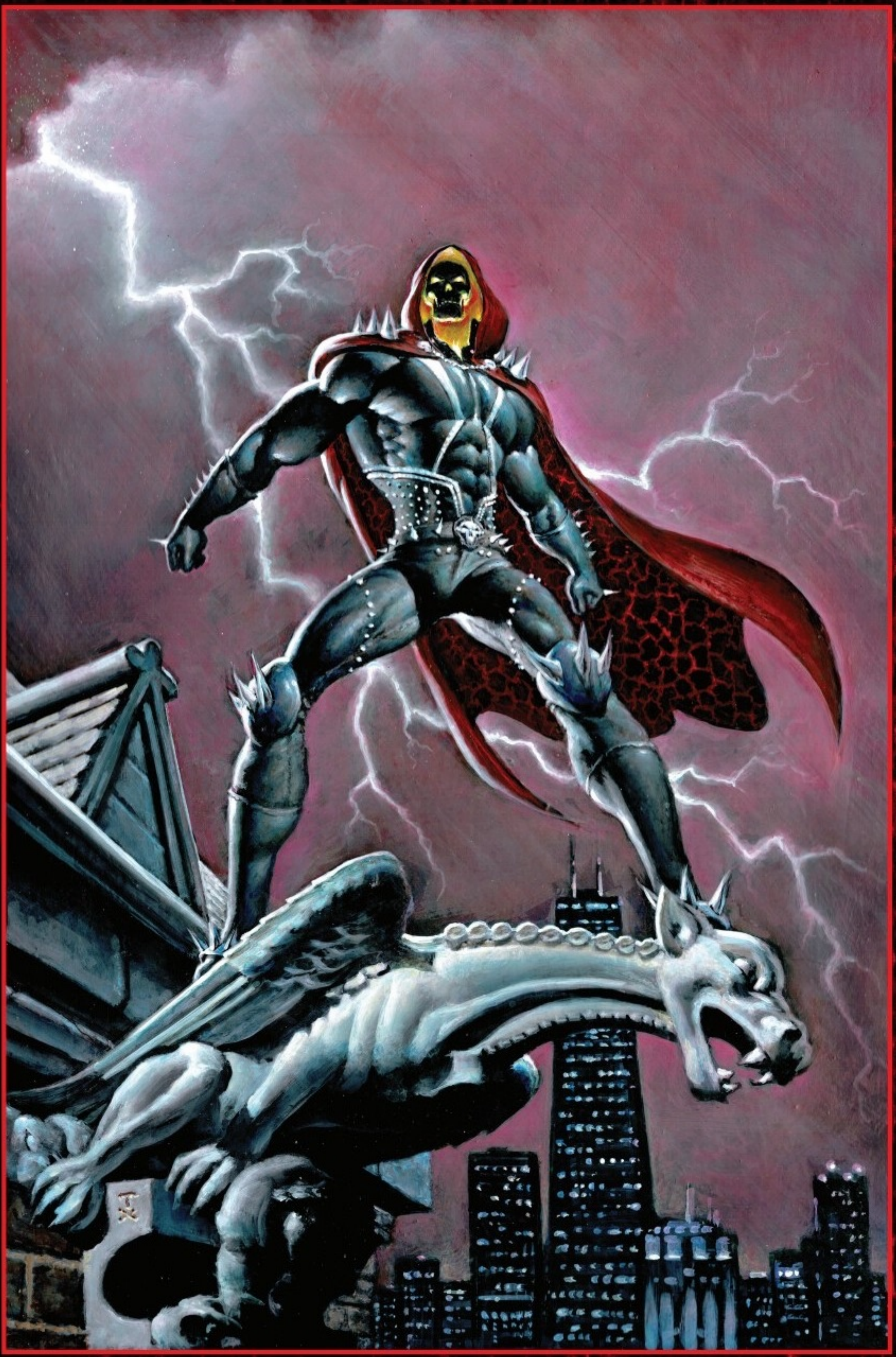

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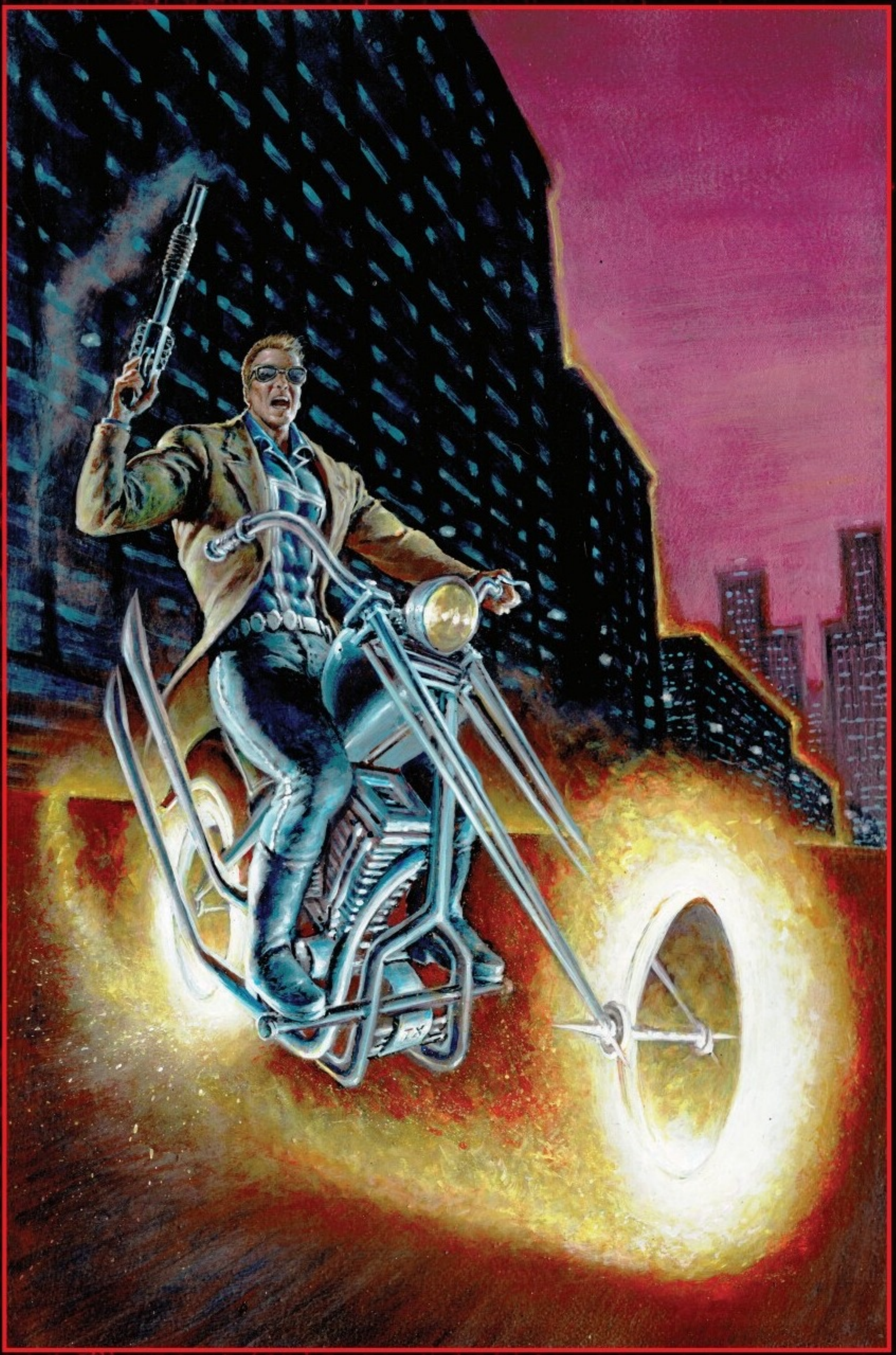

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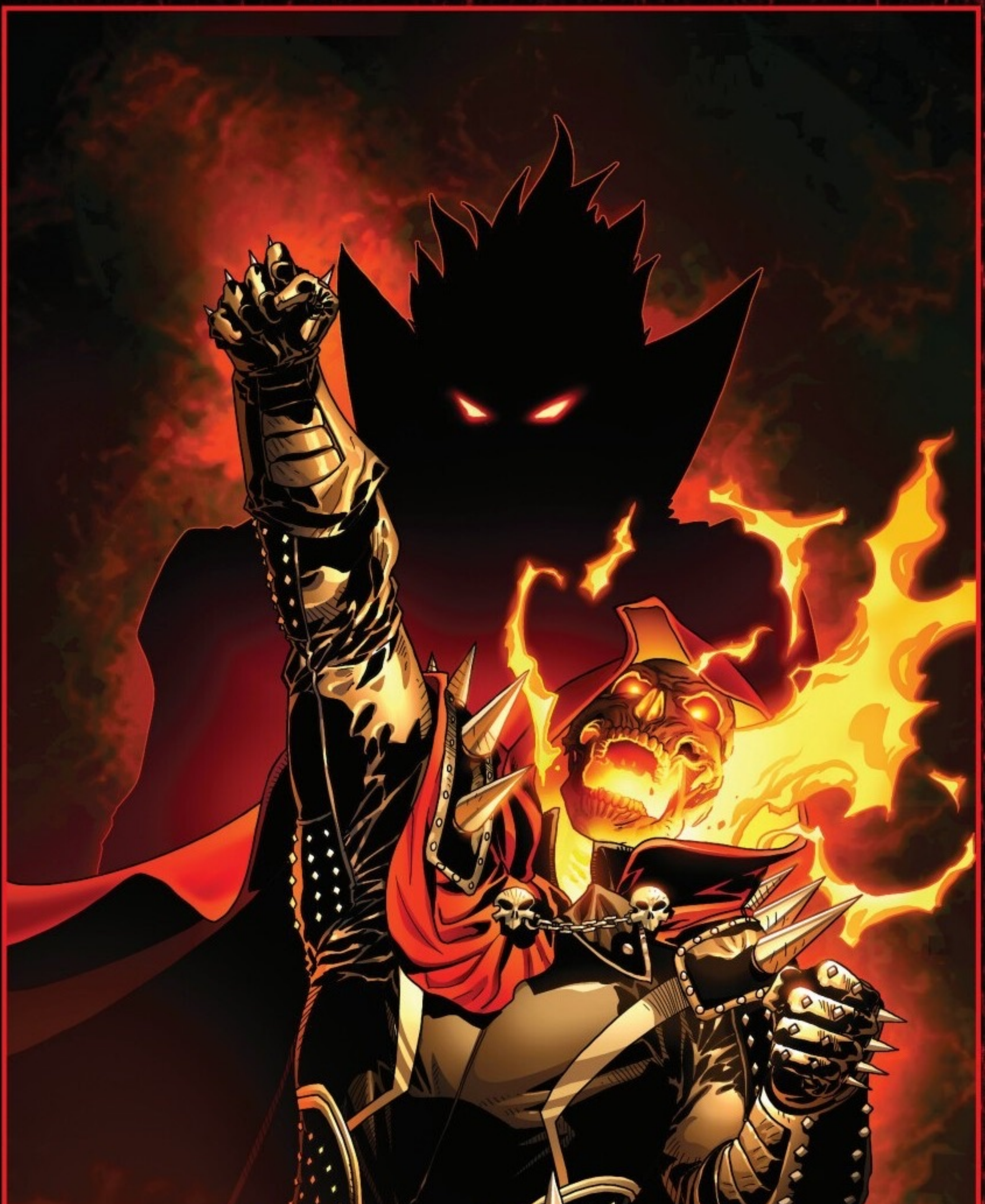

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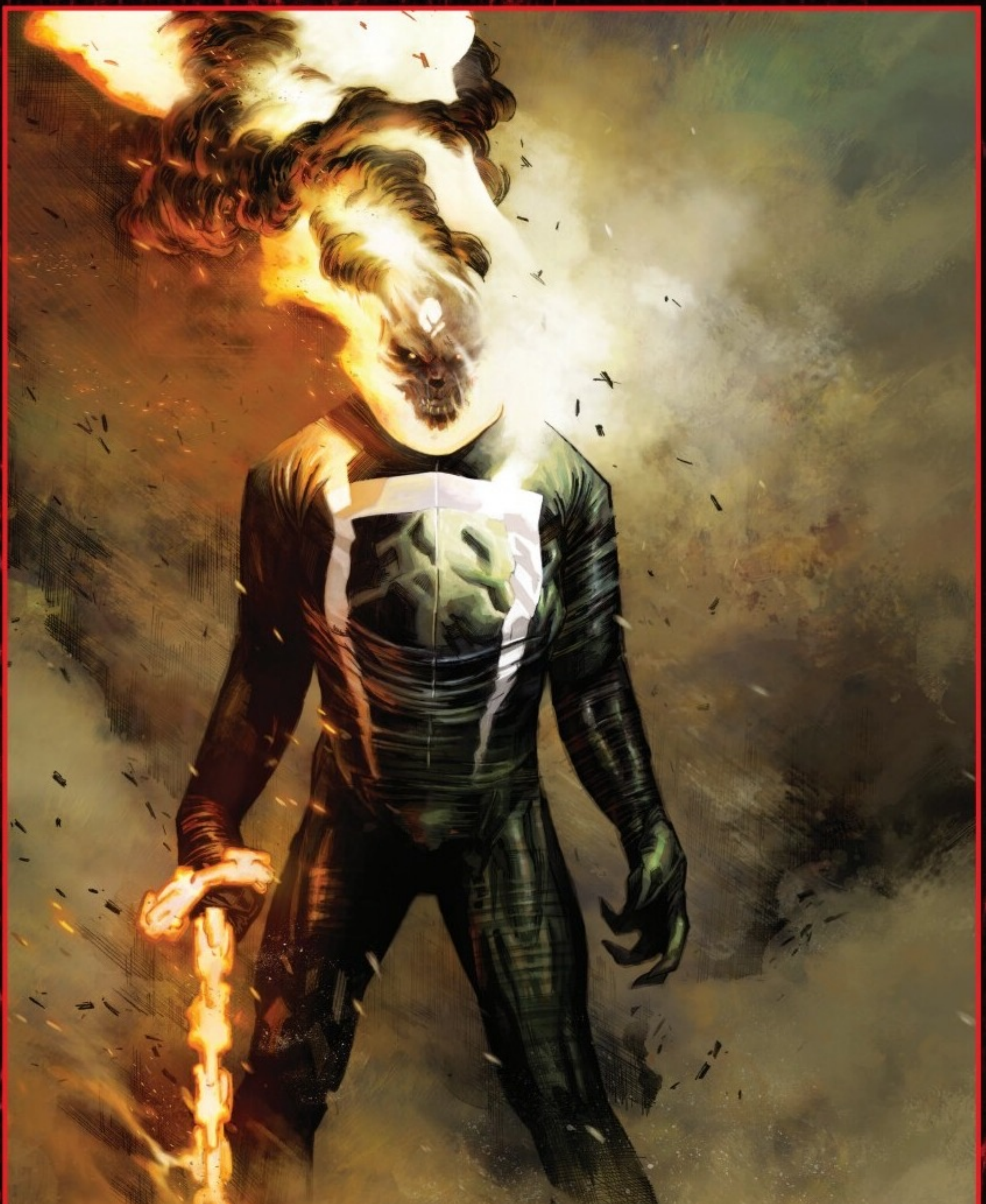

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T+

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